

HILARY BAILEY



CONNECTIONS

BLOOMSBURY READER

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LONDON · NEW DELHI · NEW YORK · SYDNEY

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A Note on the Author

One

Fleur Stockley stood barefoot on the balcony outside her front door on the first floor of Adelaide House, part of the Denbigh Estate in north-west London. She was wearing tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt with some half-obliterated lines of poetry on it. Holding a cup of tea in her hand, she stared glumly across to the other side of the street. It was ten o'clock and she had only just got up – she'd been unable to sleep the night before, as usual.

The Denbigh Estate was small, consisting of two acres of buildings bordered on each side by streets. There were three seven-storey blocks and four long four-storey ones, all set in grass lawns that were well tended and free from rubbish. The tenants of the Denbigh Estate were mostly people who had lived in the neighbourhood for several generations, often with shared histories going back to well before the estate was built in the seventies. Things did not, on the whole, go wrong on the Denbigh, as they did on the neighbouring Yarborough, infamous for its tower blocks, concrete walkways, smashed lighting, blocked rubbish chutes and uncertain lifts, where the nights were rent with the screams of arriving police cars and ambulances. Though only half a mile off through the small, quiet streets of Cray Hill, the Yarborough seemed as far away from the Denbigh Estate as the earth from the moon.

Fleur's concrete balcony in Adelaide House was guarded by red-painted railings which stretched the length of the row of eight flats on the first floor. Above were two other rows of flats with balconies. Below was a line of garages. Fleur's flat stood close to the concrete staircase down. Five of the doors on the landing were painted municipal green; the other three, Fleur's being one, were different, signifying owner occupation rather than council tenancy.

Fleur stared across at the wine bar opposite where the élite went to drink wine and eat quiche and salad for lunch or push the boat out at night with bottled beers and tequila slammers. Across the windows was written the name of the bar, McCarthy's, in gold letters. The two upper floors had dirty windows behind which boxes labelled "Moët et Chandon", "KP Peanuts" and "Chardonnay" were piled high.

On one side of McCarthy's was the launderette, empty inside but for a woman washing the floor tiles. On the other was a dusty-windowed old-fashioned upholsterer's; then came the baker's and a pub, the Findhorn Star, where the less élite met for a drink.

After the crossing, just out of Fleur's view, the road widened, became more important. There were banks, building societies, a Woolworths. North of all this lay the tube station, the Yarborough and the badlands up towards the railway, and the gas works.

Late September sunshine, a clear day, a quiet street in which little traffic passed and little was happening. A woman with her laundry loaded on to a stroller dragged a toddler into the launderette.

Fleur, her feet cold, went back into her flat. The kitchen lay to the left, the living-room to the right. She went to the kitchen and put on the kettle, looking with dislike at the kitchen tiles, which were a muddy brown with gold swirls on them. She switched the radio from channel to channel. Traffic hold-ups, unemployment statistics, Stock Exchange report, golden oldie coming to you Morag from Shaun and Annabel, Happy Birthday and we hear you're just about to announce your engagement to Ken, lucky fellow. Radio Four was going to examine faith in the new millennium. An Islamic leader, a Benedictine monk and the canon of St Paul's would all contribute. A new-age guru kicked off, assuring Fleur and all the other listeners that through their jobs, family and friends they all knew hundreds and hundreds of people, more than they could guess at. It was curious to think, he said, that if one person is given a letter by another, to be delivered to a stranger to both of them, even if that stranger is in Japan then the second person has only to hand it to another whom they think can help with the delivery, and so on, and lo and behold – within six moves, only six, the letter will have been got to Mr Yashimoto in Tokyo. Which only proved, the guru asserted, that everyone had connections with everyone else in the world. Didn't, shouldn't, that mean something to all of us?

Before the speaker began to explain what that something was, he took the chance of mentioning to the listeners that no man was an island, but part of the main ... Fleur switched off.

Over six months, in a series of slow falls, interrupted only by sudden spasmodic crashes and drops, like a bobsleigh rider, she had lost her old life, old job, home, lover, friends. She felt she was not just an island but a desert island. She went back out on to the balcony and looked down at

McCarthy's bar. A woman in an overcoat was sweeping the pavement outside.

Never mind Tokyo, Fleur thought, she couldn't be found by someone in the next street. She hadn't spoken to her mother for a month and her mother couldn't contact her – didn't even know where she was. She'd have to get in touch sooner or later. Somehow at the moment she couldn't face her mother's light bright tones, her good-woman face – lined, of course, but healthy, slightly tanned because of all the work she did in the garden. She couldn't face her stepfather either, coming in from his workshop, sleeves rolled up. She'd ring, she thought, when she'd scratched up the deposit for the phone. She must get a job. There was still the mortgage to pay.

She needed a job, any job. She didn't want to go anywhere near the film business any more – or anything like it. Something quiet and cash-in-hand was what she needed. The bank was after her because she'd co-signed the company cheques – the girl who signed everything that was put in front of her. She'd been proud of that cheque book, huge and decorative, "VERITY PRODUCTIONS" stamped across it. As far as she knew everyone owed money by the firm might be after her. She'd done a bunk, left behind a whole pile of dampening, dusty envelopes on the floor of the Soho office, a treat for the new lessees to clear up, a grim warning of what could happen to them.

She stepped aside to allow her next-door neighbour – Mrs Simmons, was it? – to go past with her wheeled shopper. Mrs Simmons nodded coldly. She and her husband had popped out while Fleur and her disloyal friend Jess were moving in Fleur's possessions. Fleur's head was still spinning with the knowledge that the old life was gone with this move to the estate. There hadn't been time to be friendly, so she'd been short with the Simmonses, her neighbours to the left-hand side. As time went by she'd noted vaguely that the elderly Simmonses were friends with the same-age Morgans, a black couple who lived on her right.

Now she watched Mrs Simmons, a short, plump woman in her fifties, wearing the fawn raincoat of her tribe, wheeling her basket to the steps. She and Jess had snubbed her when she moved in. Now it was too late.

Fleur went inside. There were two rooms, a bedroom and what had been described as a reception room, though she wondered what kind of a reception she was supposed to hold in a twelve-by-ten-foot room with a window overlooking a concrete balcony and a row of shops opposite.

Everything in the room looked wrong – the black leather couch against the white-painted bobble wallpaper, the over-large gilt-framed mirror still standing defeatedly on the beige carpet. In the bedroom, which looked out over a stretch of grass towards the Yarborough's tall blocks standing like sentinels, was an expensive brass bedstead with knobs. In that room it looked incongruous. Once it had been the only thing in a crooked room overlooking a crooked cobbled Soho alley – once she had lain on it with Ben, six great wax candles burning on the mantelpiece and windowsills – once ...

“Oh,” Fleur groaned aloud. “Oh – God – what a mess.” There were unpacked boxes under the window of the flat but that wasn't what she was talking about. It was Ben, no longer with her. No longer, it seemed, even findable. Her mind drifted. She'd have to unpack those boxes. She'd have to get a carpet, shelves ...

Fleur, she thought, get on with your life. She found herself sitting on the edge of her bed, close to tears. When the crisis came, Ben had done a bunk to America. He'd said he was going over to wrest some royalties due from one of their documentaries from a network in Atlanta which owed them money. Funnily enough, though, he'd gone first to New York. What was funnier still was that she'd been left with the overdraft and the creditors.

“I'll pay it all back, darling,” he'd told her from his friend's flat in New York. However, he'd left there a day later, or so the friend said, and, so the friend also told her, he didn't know where Ben had gone.

She lay back, crying. “I'm having a breakdown,” she thought. She went to sleep.

And so the next miserable, agonising, dull ten days passed until it was nearly October.

Two

Nothing goes on forever. Returning from signing on at the grim, Soviet-style building the 1950s council had erected for its dole queue – three men and a dog in those days, probably – and thinking about her bills, Fleur spotted a white notice in McCarthy's window.

Instead of turning to the concrete area where cars were parked and up the staircase to her flat, she drifted onwards, crossed the road and read the notice. "Part-time cook, waitress wanted." She opened the door and went in.

A wooden bar stretched along one wall of the cream-painted room. On the walls were old metal signs for railway companies: the Great Western, the LNER, a sign advising passengers not to use the facilities while the train was standing at the station. There were posters, too, for resorts: Bournemouth, Blackpool and Brighton. Others showed steam trains and porters with trolleys laden with old-fashioned luggage. Tables with metal legs stood on a wooden floor. The intention was to give the impression of a station buffet of long ago and, inasmuch as the room was empty, the floor unswept and the air smelling slightly of stale alcohol, perhaps it succeeded better than it knew.

A woman in an overall came through the door at the back of the bar carrying a broom, a duster and a spray can.

Fleur said, "I've come about the job. Is anyone around?"

The woman said, "He's upstairs." She went back through the door and called out, "Mr Housman! Mr Housman!"

There was a pause. She called again, more loudly, "Mr Housman!"

There was the sound of a man's voice calling back.

"It's about the job!" she shouted.

The voice called something out.

"He's coming down," the woman told Fleur and started to sweep the floor by the bar.

Fleur waited until a thick-set man in his late thirties came downstairs and through the door. He wore a black overcoat and carried a black business case. He looked at Fleur distractedly.

“So,” he said, “the job. You’re lucky to catch me. I’m only here an hour or two a day. I’ve got several other places.”

Fleur noticed his skin was pasty and his brown eyes tired. He did not give off the smell of success. She stood up straight, looked him in the eye and tried to convince him that he wanted to employ her.

Fleur was a tall, long-legged young woman, clear-skinned and hazel-eyed with long, dark brown hair. So far, stress, grief and shortage of money had not spoiled her looks. But neither her appearance nor her fairly successful impersonation of a strong, confident, energetic woman seemed to move Mr Housman.

“Any experience?” he asked.

Fleur had filled in for the barmaid one summer at the pub in the village where her parents lived and spent another waiting on tables in a seaside café during a break from college. She just said, “Yes – plenty.”

“You’ll be working in the kitchen mornings, helping out the chef. Then you wait at tables or you’re behind the bar, as required,” he said tiredly. “The last girl was an Australian. She suddenly took off, like they do. Two rules – don’t take anything out of the till but the customers’ change. Don’t drink on duty.”

“So I’ve got the job?” asked Fleur. “Well – I’ll come back at four, then.”

“Sort everything out with the manager,” he told her and began to move past her. Heading for the door, he said, “Welcome aboard.”

His hand was on the doorknob when Fleur said, “Mr Housman?”

He turned. “Yes?”

“About the money ...”

“Yes,” he said. “Twenty quid a day, a week in arrears. That do you?”

“Is there any chance of cash in hand?” she asked.

“That’s what we do here,” he said. “Fix up the details with Geoff Frost, the manager.”

“Goodbye,” Fleur said to his retreating back.

During the conversation the woman had been sweeping up and polishing the tables.

Fleur looked at her. “Oh well,” she said. “I’ve got the job.”

“So I heard,” the woman said. “You live over there?” She nodded at the Denbigh Estate.

“That’s right. Adelaide House, opposite.”

“Good luck, dear,” the woman said. “I don’t suppose we’ll meet again. Different hours.”

Fleur left, went back to the flat and sat down. She had a job. She felt very tired, as if she’d been doing it non-stop for a week. Today she’d not only got to work, she’d got an appointment, made earlier on. All this was rather a surprise after months of grief and nothingness.

In Wardour Street she got the agreement of small, gnomelike Gerry Sullivan, former accountant of the former Verity Productions, to divert a cheque for royalties from Bali to her.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” he said. “You realise this is a one-off.”

“Yes, I know, Gerry,” she said.

“Point is,” he admitted, “I’ve sent some money to Ben, too. But I can’t do any more – that’s it.”

“How much?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you,” he said, but he was disguising embarrassment and she guessed Ben had received five, perhaps ten times what she’d got. He added, warningly, “But that *is* it. Any more, and you’re in more trouble than you are already.”

“So where is he?” she asked.

“I asked him when he called me,” Gerry told her. “But he told me he was between addresses. I sent the money Western Union to Miami.”

Fleur felt despondent. “Miami – that seems to say it all, doesn’t it?” she said to Gerry.

“Everybody knows this wasn’t your fault,” he told her.

“It’s my fault that I was an idiot,” she said bitterly.

He didn’t deny it. “Learning’s always expensive,” he said to her by way of comfort. They shook hands and parted – probably, she thought, for the last time.

After leaving the office and hitting the familiar pavements of Soho she felt shaky and weak-kneed. She was revisiting the scenes where she had worked so hard – and signed so many pieces of paper without reading them – where she had lived, made love, been excited by the present and the future. Now those same streets were putting her in a state close to panic.

Though tempted to go back to the safety of her dull flat in Adelaide House, she thought, I got here, I got the cheque, I’m meeting Jess for lunch.

Her friend – and betrayer – Jess Stadlen was late. She always was. She worked for an independent production company, Camera Shake, developing scripts for film and TV and seeing them into production. She was married to a journalist, tall, handsome, likeable Adrian Drake, to whom she was regularly unfaithful when she was in the mood and he was out of London. In fact she had slept with Fleur's lover, Ben Campbell.

Fleur had found out about this months ago, in the office of Verity Productions. Ben had left three weeks earlier. Dust motes had been floating in the strips of light coming through the Venetian blinds. Ben's desk, the leather sofa and chairs, the glass table on which tired magazines sat now all seemed dusty too. The phones rang intermittently and were picked up by answering machines. The fax squealed out continual messages. Fleur, with files and bank statements, was trying to make sense of the accounts.

Jess had entered on long tanned legs, her bright red hair flying. She carried a bottle of vodka. She said, "Fleur – I've got something to say. How are things? Can you unplug the phones?"

"Worse than I thought," Fleur confessed, though she wasn't sure if she could trust Jess. Gossip travelled fast through the narrow streets of Soho. "Ben told me when he left he was taking the last chance to put it right."

"Heard from him?" Jess asked. Her voice was low and she was speaking more slowly than usual. Normally conversation with her was like being sprayed with buckshot.

"No," said Fleur. "The man he's staying with says he's left New York. But the company in Atlanta hasn't seen or heard from him. And there's stuff coming in here I don't know anything about." She blurted, wondering if she should, "You know that documentary he wanted to make about the City – you know, the traders and the other traders, the street market guys—"

Jess nodded.

"Well," said Fleur, "he told me the proposal had been turned down by everybody – but it looks as if he sold it to Channel Four and took a payment. Only I can't find the money anywhere or any work he's done on it and now of course I'm getting phone calls about it from the editor, Rodney Beavis. I'm bluffing, but I think he smells a rat. Jess," Fleur appealed, "I don't know anything about this. In April I was commiserating with him, saying what a good idea it was and how sad it was nobody would support it. But he had the deal set up, and the money, in March. What's he been doing?"

He's been a bit strange for months, in retrospect. Do you think he's having some kind of a breakdown?"

"Look," said Jess, putting the vodka on the table. "Got any mixers?" She got up and started to prowling about, looking. She called back from the kitchenette, "I don't know about a nervous breakdown, but there's a lot of talk about a financial breakdown."

"I know things are tight," Fleur admitted.

Jess came back carrying two vodkas and orange and handed Fleur one, which she took automatically.

"Jess, what is this? Have you come here for a reason?"

"Yes," Jess told her. She paused. "OK. I feel guilty. And also – someone's got to warn you. Ben's in big trouble. The first thing you ought to do is go and see Gerry Sullivan."

"But Ben handles all that side of things."

Jess ignored this. "You've got a joint bank account for the business. You've signed stuff – right?"

Fleur nodded.

"And your flat's collateral?"

"How do you know?" Fleur demanded.

"I know a lot," Jess said. "That's – well – look, Fleur, it's complicated."

Fleur had a bad feeling about Jess's sudden inarticulacy and was apprehensive about what she was going to hear when Jess found her tongue again. She took a big swig of vodka. "Come on, Jess, tell me."

And Jess did, confessing to a three-day affair with Ben at her house in Highgate while Ben was supposed to be up at Hadrian's Wall, filming. As she spoke Fleur stared at the carpet. She and Jess had been friends at school. They'd got jobs at the BBC practically simultaneously. Ben and Jess's husband had twice gone off together for a week's sailing, leaving Jess and Fleur to luxuriate in the facilities of a country house hotel.

Jess concluded, "I don't normally worry about these things – a bit of fun and no harm done is my motto. I'm not a homewrecker, I don't let it get out of hand—"

This was when the information sunk in and hard-pressed Fleur let out a yell, like an animal.

"Oh Christ," said Jess. "Shut up, Fleur. Don't make it any worse than it is. Look – I wouldn't even have told you—"

Fleur stood up and threw her vodka right in Jess's face. "Get out, you bloody bitch. What a filthy thing to do. I really hate you, Jess. Just get out" – she picked up the vodka bottle – "or I'll throw the rest of this over you and that nice suit you're wearing. Then I might bash you with it. You're horrible, you tart. I could murder you."

Jess, now up on her feet with vodka dribbling down her face, flinched but stood her ground. She put both hands up in a placatory gesture, warding Fleur off. "OK, OK – but listen to me – just this – Ben's gone. He may not come back, Fleur. He's in a very messy situation—"

Fleur advanced towards her, holding the bottle. "Right – right," Jess said hastily, and left the office at speed.

Fleur gazed at the door, which had just slammed. For a moment she thought of running after Jess and hitting her with the bottle. Then she sat down with a bump on the couch Jess had just vacated, put her head in her hands and groaned.

Later she began to piece together the events surrounding the days Jess and Ben had spent together. It must have been just after New Year when Ben was theoretically filming a documentary about the tourist trade in Britain during the inhospitable North-East winter. They'd been in co-production with French and German companies. The theory had been that this would sell throughout Europe, though it hadn't. Ben had been rushing up and down for a month while things went wrong, especially the weather. Fleur had tried to schedule the filming for later on in the year when there'd be more light, but Ben had gone ahead anyway, not wanting to provide any reason for the other two companies to back out. He must have gone to the North-East six or seven times – only once he'd gone to North London instead, and tucked himself up in Jess's comfortable bedroom. Her lover – her best friend, more or less – and no one had let on. Only a few months later they'd all four, she and Ben and Jess and Adrian, gone off to Pamplona together on a break.

That January she'd been the one who'd had to drive up to be with Ben and sort things out all the time. She made five trips up the motorway, one in a snowstorm and one where she'd broken down and been boxed into a lay-by by two big lorries. She'd sat there with the windows up and a mobile phone in her hand until a police car had turned up and the two trucks had eased away.

"Oh God, oh God," she groaned aloud.

She'd wondered if Jess had been lying. Hope had flared up, then subsided again until, finally, she'd had to recognise that she knew Jess had been telling the truth. She'd sat on in the office in silence broken only by traffic noise and the ever-grinding fax. She recalled Jess trying to tell her why she had confessed to the affair – because she knew something about Ben. But Jess hadn't told her what it was – hardly could have, while Fleur was menacing her with a bottle of vodka.

Fleur sat on. Jess had said, just before Fleur chased her away, that Ben might not come back. On top of the sick feeling and the pain of hearing Ben had betrayed her with Jess Fleur felt another, horrible sensation. Jess's visit had confirmed that the business was in a bad, bad mess, worse than she'd imagined.

Stooping over like an old woman, Fleur made her way to the desk, plugged the phones in and picked up the pile of fax paper which had flooded out over the floor. She sat in the office until one in the morning making notes and came in at nine sharp to start phoning.

Late that afternoon she'd called Jess and said, "You're a treacherous bitch, Jess, but at least you came round to warn me. I want you to help me."

Jess and she had met in a quiet pub near the British Museum, where no Soho gossips could see or hear them. There Jess told her that back in January Ben had said the business was going down the drain. They worked out what Fleur should do, and Fleur did it.

Now, as she headed towards the café where she and Jess were to meet, she remembered Ben vividly, as if he were beside her in the street. She'd met him six years earlier, chucked up the traineeship at the BBC because he, twelve years older, could teach her, he had said, more than she would learn there.

And he had: Ben was tall and wiry and very clever, capable of putting ten ideas together in a second, holding a room silent for five, ten minutes at a time as he spoke, joking, producing notions, quoting from poets, philosophers, films. He could write, edit scripts, run a camera as well as any cameraman. He could cut film. He could persuade, cook up budgets, put deals together. Over six years he and Fleur had made a dozen documentaries, won prizes in France and Canada and earned a reputation and a lot of money – which they'd put back, mostly, into the business.

When they met Ben had been living apart from his wife. When their affair began Fleur thought she was the luckiest woman in the world, so lucky it was unfair, so lucky it couldn't last.

It hadn't, Fleur thought. Sick at heart, she remembered Ben had left school at sixteen before taking A levels, joined the army and left when they suggested he do officer training, gone on a scholarship to Oxford – and not taken his degree. He'd worked for three companies and as an independent producer by the time she met him. Everyone knew he was brilliant. Everyone he knew was brilliant. Life with him had been brilliant.

Now, as she went to meet Jess, friend and betrayer, it was dust and bills, and more bills and a lonely bed.

Jess dashed into the café with nine hundred pounds' worth of buff coat swirling round her and a hundred pounds of red hairdo corkscrewing round her head. She plonked herself down.

"You've lost weight," she said enviously to Fleur.

"It's known as stress and living on the dole," Fleur said. "Try it – it works."

"No thanks," Jess said.

"I've got a job, anyway," Fleur said, and told her about it.

Jess's face fell. "Couldn't you find anything better than that?"

"I don't think I could handle anything better than that," Fleur said. "Not at the moment. I'm even worried I'll mess this up ..."

"Well," said Jess, "let's face it, we're all on a bit of an edge here. That second series of Edmond's Charm is doing very, very badly and my name's on that one. Then there's that series about a North Country GP in the twenties which is being wiped out by something on Channel Four – Channel Four, I ask you. Well set up, Nicole Farhi-ed and ever-so-lightly tanned as we all are, none of us is any better than our last performance. I'm pissed off with it, I honestly am. How many women actually *own* the jobs we've got? Not too many. Most of us are so thrilled by the job and the glamour and slipping in and out of the Groucho that we forget, when the axe drops, the owners are nine-tenths fellows."

"Debs is a woman," Fleur pointed out. Debs Smith, nicknamed the 'Wolverine', owned Camera Shake and was Jess's employer.

"One of the few," Jess said.

“Well, then – go independent,” Fleur said.

Jess looked at her, raised an eyebrow. “On what?” she enquired.

Fleur said, “Don’t spread it around, but Gerry’s been sending money to Ben in Miami.”

“Miami – oh my,” Jess said. “I don’t want to spoil your appetite, but have you heard anything from Helena?”

Helena was Ben’s wife. She lived in the country with their two children and was not someone Fleur thought about unless she had to.

“I haven’t, no. Why would I?”

“She’s pretty badly off, I hear. Ben hasn’t been in touch since he disappeared.”

“I can’t do anything about that. She’d better see Gerry.”

“Do you want a better job, though, Fleur? I could ask around.”

“No,” said Fleur. “Nothing like that. I’m stitched together with very light thread. I could fall apart at any moment. But cheer me up – tell me all the gossip.”

Jess fixed her with a wide-eyed gaze, leaned forward and said, “Don’t tell *anyone* this, but...”

At four on the dot, Fleur, in jeans and a sweatshirt, crossed the road to McCarthy’s.

The bar was empty except for a woman in a business suit sitting at a table doing the crossword and a man of about forty in a more casual suit who was sitting at one of the tables smoking a roll-up.

Fleur hesitated, went over and asked, “Are you the manager?”

He nodded. “You the new girl?”

When she nodded he stood up and said, “I’m Geoff – and you’re ...?”

“Fleur.”

“Follow me. You’d better get straight into the kitchen. Do what the chef says till five thirty. Then you do the waitressing while I’m behind the bar. Luckily today’s a slow day so it’ll give you a chance to work your way in.” Flinging open the kitchen door to reveal a steel kitchen counter at which a tall, thin young man with a black ponytail stood, cutting courgettes at speed, he added, “Let me fill you in on the ethic here – this isn’t a happy ship and we don’t all pull together. That right, Al?”

“Exactly right, Geoff,” the man responded colourlessly.

“So here’s the new girl. She can give you a hand till five thirty, then I want her back. In good condition.”

“Right, Geoff,” Al said. When the door closed behind Geoff he looked up and said, “The storeroom’s next door. There’s some overalls on a shelf. Hopefully they’re clean.”

In what she perceived to be a sparsely supplied and under-clean storeroom she found a pile of white aprons and put one on. She went back into the kitchen pondering, Wouldn’t a restaurant’s stores usually have catering packs of flour, sugar, rice and the like, and big tins of this and that?

The kitchen was in fact very clean. A big sink and a massive cooker stood against the back wall and there were a giant fridge and freezer. Fleur stood on the black and white tiled floor and asked, “What shall I do?”

“You’d better get these,” he said and pushed the huge chopping block covered with courgettes towards her. “Then do the rest of the veg. I’ve had to change the menu – the supplier’s not delivered for two days. I’m having to improvise with what I can get at Tesco’s.” Fleur had observed six bulging Tesco bags on the floor by the large stove. “When that’s done get all the onions from one of the bags and put them through the food processor.”

As he spoke he was walking to the kitchen door. He pushed it open and shouted, “Geoff! I want the money for the shopping *now!*”

Geoff called back, “When I’ve looked in the till.”

“Geoff – I’m a cook, not a fucking investor! Ring fucking Housman again.”

He came back into the kitchen where he knelt down and began to go through the bags. “Don’t ask what’s happening here,” he said from the floor.

Fleur did not comment. “Where shall I put these?” she asked, pointing at the sliced courgettes.

He responded, “In a bowl, dear, where else? Get the bloody onions done, love. I need a lot.”

For an hour and a half Fleur chopped, sliced, mixed the ingredients for pastry in the mixer, stirred and minded the frying pan when Al went out into the yard for a cigarette. During this time he kept up a running monologue, chiefly about politics. His views were much like her dedicated-carpenter-and-Guardian-reading stepfather’s, only a lot less mild.

Finally, when Fleur's feet were beginning to ache from standing in the same spot, Al sent her into the dark yard for a cigarette which he kindly gave her. The light from the open doorway fell on weeds and straggling grass and piled-up boxes.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" he called out to her.

"I used to work in films but it went wrong," she called back. "What about you?"

"I can't deal with normal life," he explained unhelpfully, "or what passes for it." Evidently he then looked at his watch. "Oi, you'd better run now – Geoff said he wanted you in the bar."

"I'd better go home and change," she said, alarmed, coming back into the kitchen.

"You'll have to look sharp," he said. "Thing is, after the bar opens at six Geoff disappears. I don't know where he goes. So you'll be on your own until he ambles in again about eight."

"I only live opposite," Fleur said, taking off her apron. "Where shall I put this?"

"Take it with you – wash it yourself. The laundry never calls these days."

"All right," Fleur said, thinking that all the evidence was pointing to a job loss in the near future. She should know.

Having told Geoff she was coming back shortly she went across to Adelaide House and ran up the concrete steps to the floor she lived on. Outside the Morgans' flat next door to hers she saw Mrs Morgan and Mrs Simmons in grave conversation.

They all nodded at each other and, as Fleur let herself in to her flat, she heard the two women continue their conversation.

"So it's Christmas at the latest," Mrs Morgan was saying, regret in her voice.

"Well, it'll be nice for you," came Mrs Simmons' voice, no less upset.

Fleur had a quick shower, put on a black skirt and top, combed her hair, put on minimal eye make-up and lip gloss and dashed back to McCarthy's. To her horror, Geoff was gone. There were two men in business suits sitting at a table, though, and as she came in, took off her coat and bundled it under

the bar, one said to the other, “That’s a relief – I thought we’d have to go to the Findhorn Star.”

Fleur didn’t know where anything was and after serving one of the men with a beer and the other with a gin and tonic she realised she had no idea how to work the till. However, the bar prices were pinned up near it and, pleading for exact change, she began a mini-till in a cardboard box below the bar and hoped she could last out until Geoff returned.

Three young women from a nearby office arrived and bought glasses of wine, and an elderly man came in and took what she assumed was his normal seat on a stool at the bar. “New here?” he asked.

Fleur smiled and nodded, trying to memorise the bar prices.

“You’ll get used to me,” he told her. “Are you married?”

“That’s right,” said Fleur, “to a professional wrestler.”

A man and woman came in with a small child and sat down. Though Fleur evaded their eyes they started looking at her expectantly.

The elderly man told her helpfully, “The menus ought to be under the bar.”

“Thanks,” said Fleur. The family ordered and she left the bar for the kitchen. She put her head round the door and said, “Three burgers, two baked potatoes, one fries, one salad and where’s the red wine?”

“In a box on the stairs,” Al told her. “How do they want the burgers?”

Fleur hadn’t asked. “All medium,” she told him firmly. She found the wine in the box on the stairs. There were only five bottles left. She raced back to the bar.

“All right,” said one of the men in business suits to the other. “You’ve twisted my arm – I’ll have a whisky.”

Go home to your wives and families, Fleur silently urged them. The place was filling up.

Geoff strolled in at eight fifteen, a quarter of an hour after Fleur had decided that if any more customers arrived, she’d go home. Only one bottle of red wine and two of white were left.

Geoff nodded approvingly at Fleur and said, “Well done.” He opened the till.

“I didn’t know how to work it,” Fleur said. “The money’s all under here. There’s hardly any wine.”

“Got it in the boot outside,” he said. “It’s unlocked. Can you nip out and fetch it in? White Merc. You can see it from here. Do it now, or they’ll have me.”

Swearing under her breath, as Geoff put the profits in the till and served some drinks, Fleur carried six boxes of wine into the bar.

“Couple over there waiting for dessert,” Geoff pointed out. “Hold the fort while I move the car.” He was gone again.

By the time he came back she’d taken the order for dessert and delivered it, dealt with a proposition and served the last bottles of white wine.

Geoff showed her how the till worked and sat down heavily in front of the bar. His eyes were very red and his face pasty. Fleur wondered what he’d been up to during the last few hours. She also asked him if he’d pay her cash at the end of every shift. She wasn’t sure if, one way or another, the job would last even a week – it might collapse, or she might. Reluctantly, he agreed.

Around ten Al emerged from the kitchen. “You’re on your own now,” he said to Fleur. He held his hand out to Geoff who handed him his pay from the till. “And the shopping,” Al said firmly. “Sixty-eight pounds nineteen.”

Geoff produced the cash and Al said, “Cheers, Fleur. See you tomorrow?”

Fleur found herself grinning. She said, “I can’t wait.”

Three

Fleur was still mourning her lost life but, with the feeling she was at least ticking over in neutral, began to get used to her job. It was obvious that McCarthy's was running on a cash-only basis. Each day the previous day's takings, left overnight in the till, provided the money for the next day's purchases and Fleur became accustomed to going to Tesco and coming back with huge carrier bags of food. Sometimes Al went with her if the load was expected to be exceptionally heavy. Each night Geoff brought along supplies for the bar in the boot of his car and Fleur was expected to unload. At least, she reflected, all this was keeping her fit and at least this time the cash flow where she worked was not her responsibility, though she knew what the probable outcome would be. Good, she thought – when the bailiffs hit McCarthy's she'd walk away and find another job.

She got her telephone connected and late one evening called up the answering machine at the old office. Mysteriously, it was still on and, as if in a dream, she heard voices asking for Ben.

A few days after the installation of the phone, the silent calls began, two or three a day sometimes. Was it Ben, wanting to speak but unable to do so? At the memory of their time together, she drooped, remembering the laughter, the champagne poured out in the club after they'd concluded a successful deal or finished filming. After one silent call she looked round her simple flat; thought about spending ten hours at a time on her feet, dashing in and out of the kitchen; compared her new associates – unhealthy, deceitful-looking Geoff and stringy, pale, drop-out Al – with the well-set-up, smart, successful people among whom she'd previously lived. Oh well, she thought – oh well, and went to bed.

The wind started blustering the leaves off the young trees outside Adelaide House. It rained a lot. The clientele at McCarthy's began to come in soaked, shaking themselves like wet dogs. Damp macs clogged the coat rack. Fleur borrowed some tools from Mr Simmons and put up a few bookshelves in her room. She unpacked some items, though without much enthusiasm.

Then crisis came. It began with the departure of the Morgans, who were retiring to the Caribbean island they had come from forty years earlier. Children and grandchildren arrived early one day, helped to pack, bore off useful items. Fleur left for work in the middle of the morning as usual and by the time she returned, late, the flat next door was empty and the couple on their long journey back to the home they'd left long ago, young and hopeful.

It was the next day when, taking her rubbish to the chute, she came across Mrs Simmons, her face pale and set, gallantly wheeling her shopper along the landing to the stairs. Fleur said, "I was sorry to see the Morgans moving," and Mrs Simmons responded, with a sigh, "We were neighbours for over twenty years. They lived upstairs at first, then got transferred to the smaller flat when their kids moved out. Our kids went to school with theirs, you know." She added, "I've tried to find out who's moving in, but the council say they can't tell me. Won't, more likely."

"That's a shame," Fleur said.

Mrs Simmons evidently thought Fleur was taking too little interest. "It'll affect you, too," she said, "if we get the wrong sort. I just wish the Morgans had bought the place when they had the chance. As it is, we'll get whoever the council chooses to dump on us. It could be anybody."

Fleur expressed a concern she did not really feel but began to see the point of Mrs Simmons' fears one evening when she came back early from McCarthy's and was faced with Dominic Floyd, wearing worn jeans, a ripped T-shirt with an anarchist symbol on it and a black leather jacket. He was ringing her doorbell.

He was tall, extremely thin, with shoulder-length hair and large dark eyes. Had it not been for an air of fatigue and hard times he would have been as handsome as a model. Behind him stood a big black and white dog, blunt-muzzled and intelligent-eyed. The dog began to wave his tail at Fleur.

Dominic himself said, "Sorry to bother you. We're moving in next door and I wondered if you had a big screwdriver. We're trying to do some work and just as we were moving in some villain's had it away with half my tools."

Fleur put her key in the lock. "Try Mr Simmons in the next flat," she said. She wasn't sure what impression her new neighbour's appearance would make on Mr Simmons, but thought the Simmonses would have to

meet him sooner or later anyway. She went inside saying, “Welcome to Adelaide House.” Then, thinking he might be the son of some reliable couple moving in, she turned and asked, “Is it just you in the flat?”

“Not really,” he told her. “There’s three of us in fact – me, Joe and Vanessa.” His tone was deliberately vague – it was, after all, only a one-bedroom flat.

“It’s a nice place,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’ve been really lucky.”

Before she could close her own door there was the sound of the one on the other side opening. A brown-haired young woman in a long cotton dress appeared behind Dominic. Fleur noticed her feet were bare and thought they must be freezing.

The woman peered up at Dominic through her curtains of hair and said, “Dom, I can’t make the central heating go on.” Meanwhile the dog began to nose into Fleur’s knees, tail still wagging. Fleur bent down to pat him.

“He likes you,” Dominic said.

“Nice dog,” Fleur said, gazing into the animal’s bright amiable eyes.

“Dom—” appealed the barefoot woman.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll sort it.” To Fleur he said, “What’s the man next door’s name?”

“Simmons,” she said.

“Nicer to use his name if I’m trying to borrow his tools,” he said. “Come on, Jason, leave the lady alone. See you.”

Fleur nodded and went in. She turned up the television to cover the sound of heavy banging and music from next door, only turning it down when her phone began to ring.

“Darling!” came her mother’s voice. “What’s happening? Where are you? We’ve been so worried. Why on earth haven’t you been in touch? Robin had to get your number from Jess and he had trouble finding *her*, too – Fleur, what’s going on? Is anything the matter?”

“I’m so sorry, Grace. It’s the move—”

“Well – exactly. Why have you moved? Where are you?” And, as Fleur opened her mouth to reply, her mother’s voice came again, cautiously this time. “Is Ben there?”

Fleur’s mind drifted off, visualising her mother with her soft, well-cut, silvering hair, wearing some soft, autumnal-coloured jersey and skirt. She’d

be standing in her charming sitting-room overlooking the garden, the lawn, the old mulberry tree. Or perhaps she was at the pine kitchen table, where orderly rows of jam and pickle stood neatly labelled on a shelf, her grandmother's Victorian tea-set on the dresser.

She pulled herself together.

"Ben?" she answered. "Ben's in Florida, I think. I don't know why, or if he's coming back."

"Oh dear – oh Fleur," came her mother's distressed voice. "Oh dear," she said again.

The banging from the flat next door became louder. "What is that noise?" her mother asked, perhaps relieved not to have to comment immediately on Ben's mysterious disappearance. She'd always liked him.

"It's some people moving in next door," Fleur told her.

"It's very loud," her mother said doubtfully.

Grace Carew-Stockley had lived for twenty years in the same quiet house, once the village forge, at Yarrow St Mary in Kent. She supplied her own explanation. "I suppose it's a party wall."

"It is, Mum. It's an ex-council flat, so the walls aren't all that thick." She continued succinctly, "The firm went bust and I'd secured some of the debts with my flat. The bank took it. I just managed to seize back enough, with the help of the firm's accountant, to put down a small deposit here. Jess helped me to present myself to a building society in a respectable light. Then she helped me move too."

There was a pause. "Oh – good heavens," came Grace's voice. "Why didn't you tell us? What's Ben doing about all this?"

"I'm not sure. He's out of touch."

"Oh, Fleur. Jess didn't explain anything about all this to Robin. Why on earth didn't you tell us? Fleur—"

Fleur's doorbell rang. She got up and carried the phone to it. "I'm just answering the door," she told her mother. "Who is it?" she called out.

"Doug Simmons from next door," a voice called back.

"Oh – Mum, it's my neighbour. Can I ring you back?" Fleur asked.

"Yes – yes, of course," came her mother's disconcerted voice. Fleur rang off.

Doug Simmons stood in the middle of the room, his solid, lined face angry. "What do you think of all this noise? It's past ten o'clock and it's

coming right through your walls to ours. I'm going to go and complain."

Realising he wanted her to come with him, Fleur said, "I'll come too, to make sure they aren't planning to go on all night."

Together they went to the Morgans' old front door. "He's been round already, trying to borrow my tools," Doug Simmons said resentfully. He pressed the bell long and hard and waited. "I don't like the look of this," he continued, half to himself.

It was the young woman, Vanessa, who opened the door. She stood looking at them in wild alarm. Still barefoot, she trailed an old teddy bear from one thin arm. She turned uncertainly, calling "Dom?"

Dominic came into the hall, the dog behind him. In his hand was a small saw. Fleur, looking at him and thinking of Doug Simmons at her side, hoped there would be no trouble.

Dominic carefully put the saw down on the floor. He said, "I'm really sorry about the noise—"

"So you ought to be," Doug Simmons said uncompromisingly.

"We're just moving in, man."

Emerging behind Dominic, Fleur saw another figure in jeans, shorter than Dom, slighter, with very short pale hair. He was holding a hammer at the end of a stringy arm.

"What's happening?" he called, advancing. Fleur noted a pale face and very blue eyes. She began to worry again about violence.

"Too much noise," Dominic told him.

The other man appeared to accept this. "Yeah," he said and disappeared back into the room he'd come from.

"We'll pack it in for today," Dominic said to Mr Simmons.

There was the sound of loud hammering from the next room. Music started up. "Joe!" Dominic called back. "We're stopping for tonight."

Joe re-emerged. "What about my bed?"

"Kip on the floor for tonight," Dom told him. "Let these good people get some rest."

"Half an hour," said Joe.

"Can you give us another half-hour?" Dominic asked Doug Simmons and Fleur.

"Long as that's all it is," Mr Simmons said discouragingly.

“Sorry about all this.”

“So am I.”

“Goodnight, then.”

Doug Simmons would not yield. “I hope it will be,” he said and turned round and marched off.

Two paces away he paused outside Fleur’s front door and invited her in for a cup of tea. Soon Fleur found herself in the Simmons’ neat front room sitting on a floral sofa with a cup of tea in her hand.

Doug Simmons said, “I don’t know, but it looks to me as if the council’s foisted on us some of London’s bloody homeless. I’ll go straight down there tomorrow.” Fleur knew from Betty Simmons that Doug had taken premature retirement from driving a bus, due to chronic back strain.

“They’ve got to live somewhere, I suppose,” his wife said mildly, though her eyes were anxious. Fleur was uncertain whether this was because of the new tenants or her husband’s reaction to them.

“Yes, on the Yarborough. That’s the place for them. That’s what they’re fit for. They’re the wrong sort for a quiet, well-kept block like this.”

“Doug – there’s no point in antagonising them,” his wife appealed.

“Perhaps we should give them a chance,” Fleur added.

He looked impatiently at both of them. “That’s all very well. But I’ve bought this flat – and you’ve bought yours,” he said to Fleur. “I don’t want this estate dragged down. Supposing one of us wanted to sell – what’s it going to be like with rubbish strewn all over the landing, loud music and that dog barking at everybody? It doesn’t take much for a place to start on the slippery slide. That’s a one-bedroom flat. What are they all doing there? The dog’s illegal, too. You’re not allowed to keep pets here. I’ll take that up at the Town Hall, as well.”

“Why don’t you give them a few days, Doug,” his wife suggested, “just to see how things go?”

He shook his head. “I don’t need days,” he told her. “I’ve seen enough. That girl’s on drugs. You should see her. Tell her,” he urged Fleur. “Tell her how she came to the door. No shoes on and holding a teddy bear. A kid’s toy – I ask you. And thin—” He shook his head again. “I tell you, that’s got to be drugs. In this world,” said Doug Simmons, “silence means consent. And I’m not consenting. The thing to do is get your complaints in hard and fast...”

That was the way matters were left. Fleur went home. The noise of hammering and music stopped not long after, though not before a noisy dispute between the two men had penetrated the thin walls of her flat. By that time, ignoring the winking light on her answering machine, Fleur was in bed.

When she played the message back next day there was another of the long silences. No message.

Four

A part from the normal sound of moving, for the next few days all was peaceful on the landing at Adelaide House. The next-door tenants actually made less of their move than wealthier neighbours with higher expectations might have. Fleur deduced her new neighbours slept late and went out late in the evenings. From time to time she would hear their front door bang in her sleep. But trade in the bar was brisk, the cleaner seemed to have made her last call at McCarthy's and with the cleaning to do, the trips to Tesco, the kitchen duty, the waiting and the bartending, Fleur was not suffering from insomnia. She still felt low, still thought of Ben, but the sheer exhaustion of a ten or eleven hour day took her mind off it to some extent.

Protests to the manager were fruitless. He implied that her position was to do as she was told and that if she didn't like it he would find someone else who would be glad of the job. So Fleur got on with it. Since she had begun at McCarthy's three weeks earlier she had not seen Mr Housman again. Perhaps he called early, before she arrived; perhaps he never came at all.

In a state of collapse after ten hours on her feet one evening, Fleur said to Geoff, who was behind the bar, "Geoff – I've had it. I've had no time off for eight days. I'm going home."

A party of fourteen from a local building society was singing "Happy Birthday" for the umpteenth time and calling for more tequilas, but, looking at her and realising she was serious, Geoff agreed. "Get your coat, then," he said. "Early start tomorrow, though. There's a party coming in for lunch."

Fleur held out her hand for her pay. He opened the till and gave her the money. Fleur walked out, legs and back on fire.

Outside, about to cross the road towards Adelaide House, Fleur almost bumped into her new neighbour, Dominic, who had his dog trotting beside him. Jason's foot wore a neat bandage.

"What about a drink?" he asked and they went into the Findhorn Star, where Fleur flopped down exhausted. Dominic insisted on buying her a lager. Fleur had imagined the trio next door to her living on benefit, but

noticed that, at the bar, Dominic paid from a big roll of notes from the pocket of his leather jacket. Where had that come from? she wondered.

Back at the table Dominic lifted his glass. "Cheers!" he said.

"Cheers," she responded.

"Do tell me," he said immediately, leaning forward, "what brought you to this neck of the woods."

"The short version is, the firm went bust, my job, my flat and my partner went with it."

"A yuppie tragedy, eh?"

She thought sadly of Ben and decided she didn't like Dominic's challenging tone. In any case, what was she doing fraternising with this drop-out? Drop-out? He'd never been far enough in to drop out – and where did all that money come from?

She said, "A yuppie tragedy is still a tragedy, if you're in it. So – what about you?"

"What's to say?" he asked. "Vanessa, Joe and me were on the streets. Then, lo and behold, after Van's mother put her on the council housing list practically at birth this flat came up. Van's mother's a social worker so she organised all the paperwork. Here we are, rehoused, next door to you." He gave a sardonic smile. "Do you mind?" he asked.

She returned his smile. "Do you care?" She added, "Do you want the other half?" He agreed, she went and got it.

The landlord, fat, sharp-eyed Patrick, looked at her as he drew the lagers. "Slumming?" he asked, with a glance at Dominic.

Fleur saw that living in Adelaide House and drudging next door in the wine bar had not wiped out the traces of a Home Counties and boarding-school upbringing. "He's my next door neighbour," she said.

"Lucky you," he said, as she paid for the drinks.

"Where do you come from originally?" she asked Dominic.

"Liverpool," he said. "But I ran away."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen," he told her. "Old enough." He added, "I expect at that age you were still playing hockey."

"More or less," she said. She wasn't planning to tell him the story of her life.

Patrick was calling for last orders. She stood up. “Well, thanks for the drink, Dominic. It’s been great.”

“Do it again some time,” he said, also standing.

Halfway across the road Dominic took off with a cry. “Shit! That’s my phone.” He dashed to the gate, veered left through it and began to leap up the steps to the balcony two at a time.

Fleur, watching the flying figure, realised that she was attracted to Dominic. This gave her a shock because for a long time now she had been attracted to no one, and she never wanted to be again after Ben. Still less to a virtual squatter, with a way of life she didn’t want to look at too closely and nothing going for him but a dog with a bandaged paw, now limping after him.

As she felt the horror of fancying Dominic, she asked herself: what kind of person with a big roll of cash pelts five hundred yards and up a flight of stairs to get to a phone call? And she answered herself easily: a person setting up a deal, that’s who, a person who is probably doing drugs, or selling them, or both.

When she got into her own flat there was another message on her answering machine: a long pause, where no one spoke and then the phone went down. Fleur groaned, “Ben – you stupid sod.” She was beginning to feel paranoid. Her number was ex-directory. She didn’t want any creditors to find her at present. Only her mother, Jess, Gerry Sullivan and the people at the wine bar knew what it was. She had given up calling 1471 to find out the number of the caller because she was sick of the polite voice saying, “We do not have the caller’s number.” Was it really Ben – or someone else?

Five

Fleur got a day off and went to see her mother and stepfather at Bucknells, their roomy house in Kent. They had lived there since Fleur was eight, when her mother had married Robin Carew-Stockley.

She took a train, then a bus through lanes where leaves were falling from trees and hedges, and past ploughed fields where crows hopped. There were well-tended houses and large gardens, orchards and lawns, for this was an area part rural, part commuter territory. The atmosphere was peaceful, the air seemed very clean.

She walked past the big yew on the lawn up the old brick path and knocked on the door with its big brass knocker. The window beside her had in it two posters, *Stop the Bypass* and *Save St Christopher's Children's Ward*. Her mother was active in local issues.

Small and pretty, with softly waving, just-greying brown hair, Grace opened the door. She wore a grey-blue jersey and matching skirt, which swirled round shapely calves. "Darling!" she said. "At last – we'd practically given you up! Come in – lunch is nearly on the table."

Fleur followed her mother into a large kitchen which overlooked the long lawn running around the house. There were flower beds and shrubs and behind a cloak of cypress was her stepfather's workshop. She saw him come through the trees and down the path, a tall man with a shock of grey hair dressed in a sweater and corduroys, his working clothes. He embraced Fleur, then moved to the sink and washed his hands thoroughly. As he did so he said, "So glad you're here at last."

"So am I," said Fleur, happy, relaxed in the atmosphere she had known so well for so long.

"What kept you?" he asked.

"Everything," Fleur told him. "How's trade?"

He told her he was on the fourth chair of an elaborately carved set of eight he was making for a local resident, a City businessman. "I don't like the design very much," he said. "And then he wants them gilded, which will make it worse, in my opinion. But I'm just a humble craftsman, and I works for them as pays me."

“And has the money,” Grace added. “Robin’s taken on Mrs Armitage’s son – you know, Les – as an apprentice.” Mrs Armitage had been Grace’s daily woman for ten years.

“That’s very good,” said Fleur. “There’s not much work round here.”

“They all get into trouble,” Grace said. “Bored – jobless – next thing is car theft, burglary ... But, Fleur, tell me, what’s it like where you live? Is it all right? What is it? Where? Have you thought, darling, of coming back here for a little while? You could look for a job just as easily from here.”

“No, honestly, Grace, I’m fine. The flat’s fine. The wine bar job’s OK. It pays the bills, more or less.”

“Yes, but Fleur—” her mother said helplessly, summoning up without words the carefree childhood, the good school, O levels, A levels, the film course.

“I suppose it’s not leading anywhere,” Robin said easily. “A stopgap. Look, Fleur, we don’t want to pry, but where’s Ben?”

“Last heard of in Miami,” Fleur told him flatly.

“Miami – good God,” Robin said. “Got in over his head, I imagine. I know running a small business can be difficult – worse when it’s films, I suppose.”

“That’s the charitable way of looking at it,” Fleur told him.

Grace would have no truck with bitterness or blame. “Perhaps it’s better to wait for his own explanation,” she said. “Can you get out the knives and forks, Fleur?”

“It’s obviously been an unhappy episode for everyone,” Robin added.

Yes, thought Fleur, laying the table. Ben got me to back the business with my flat, slept with my best friend, told her but not me he was worried about going bust, went bust, disappeared leaving me to deal with the creditors and on top of that his wife’s in the country with children and no money. His explanation of the unhappy episode will be interesting, if it ever comes. She did not say any of this. Grace and Robin had always disliked ugly conflicts and accusations and believed as an article of faith that difficulties could be resolved reasonably and without rancour.

Grace drained vegetables. “I’ve made that apple pudding you like – so wicked, so many eggs, so much cream. There’s a casserole to start, a bit of lamb, mostly veg. All from Jim Gates – he’s gone organic.” She put on oven gloves and started pulling dishes from the oven.

“Baked potatoes – oh, wonderful,” sighed Fleur.

“London’s a terrible place but surely you can’t be deprived of the humble baked spud?” Robin enquired.

“We serve them at the wine bar, but they’re all microwaved.”

“Ugh,” said Grace with distaste, putting the casserole on the table.

Over lunch they talked about Robin’s work, the campaigns to keep open the children’s ward of the local hospital and to prevent the building of a bypass.

Later Fleur and Robin walked through a strong wind down the lane beside the house to the tree-ringed clearing on the common. Children were picking up conkers under the big horse chestnut. Further on, by the pond, a boy and his father were sailing a boat. There came a cry from the boy. The yacht had been caught and taken out towards the middle of the water and the string holding it appeared to have been caught somewhere. Father and son stood looking at the white sail bobbing out on the ruffled grey surface of the lake.

“Jim,” Robin called and joined them. He took the string and began to make some complicated passes with it. The boat freed and he gave the string to the boy, who pulled the boat in gloomily, muttering, “If we had a proper remote control boat this wouldn’t have happened.”

“You want to grow up where I did,” his father told him. “Fishing in the canal beside the gas works.” To Fleur, Jim in his tweed coat and expensive country shoes looked like the kind of man who never looked at a gas works he wasn’t planning to buy.

The boy landed the yacht and picked it up. “It’s all wet,” he said.

“He won’t make a sailor,” his father remarked.

“I’d *rather* fish in the canal.”

Robin introduced Jim Harrison, a comparative newcomer to the neighbourhood. “My accountant, I call him.”

Fleur smiled and thought, Not another one. They went back to tea with the Harrisons, who lived in half of what had formerly been an almshouse. The other half they left empty for guests. Mimi was a tired, humorous woman in her early forties, very different from her big, ruddy husband. Grace, summoned by phone, came in not long after they arrived and they all sat down in the large, comfortable drawing-room. They talked of the hospital campaign. Jim was working to prove the children’s ward was

viable. "It looks as if the indirect costs would make it more expensive to close than keep open," he told them. "Not that they'll ever admit it."

"This is small stuff for Jim," his wife confided to Fleur. "He spent twenty years with a big City bank."

"They sold out to Strauss Jethro Smith," Jim remarked easily. "Good news for me – got paid off, pensioned off and sent out of the rat race. That was when we came down here. Honestly, I don't think we've ever been happier."

Fleur glanced at Robin, standing by the window, and at her mother in an easy chair and said, "Ah."

"Time for tea?" asked Mimi Harrison and got up.

"Let me help," said Fleur's mother, also rising.

"So what do you do?" Jim asked her when they had gone.

"I was in films," she told him. "I and a partner had a small production company. That stopped. Now I'm in wine bars. Well, one wine bar in particular. I work there."

"So what happened to the career in film?"

"The firm went under," said Fleur, "and I found myself unexpectedly at liberty." It was easier, she found, to talk to Jim about this than to her own parents. They seemed upset and embarrassed by what had happened to her, which was why she had not confided in them in the first place. But Jim Harrison had evidently spent his life dealing with commercial ups and downs, people on the edge, people falling over it. "Plenty of time to start again, at your age," he remarked with assurance. "It'll work out."

After tea Fleur, on an impulse, said that she must get back to London because she had arranged to do part of the evening at the wine bar. This was untrue and quite why she said it she simply did not know. News of her abrupt departure discomfited Robin and Grace. Expressions of uncertainty and anxiety crossed their faces when Fleur told them she was going, though possibly no one but she, who knew them so well, would have guessed what they were feeling.

In the train, heading back to the dirty, noisy and overcrowded city, she wondered about this impulse to leave. Had her failure, professional and emotional, made her feel an alien in the careful, caring world of her mother and stepfather, out of place in the good home with the good causes and the good people? Did she feel she had disappointed them, they who had been so

careful to undemandingly help her on the path to a career they were not enthusiastic about? And they'd loved Ben, whose work was so often allied with causes they both supported. They'd appreciated his intelligence, his sensitivity, his care for her. Plainly, even now, they found it hard to believe he had done anything wrong. So, Fleur thought gloomily, if Ben had been blameless then it followed someone else might have been at fault – herself. Resentfully, she guessed that they were already saying things like “faults on both sides”. That was the trouble with people like her parents who preferred not to accuse and blame – bad situations ended up being nobody's fault, or everybody's. Disloyally she wondered if in this situation she might not have been better off with parents who asked nasty, searching questions, made unpleasant assertions, started rows.

As the train whisked through a darkening landscape of fields, trees and hedges, the twinkle of little towns and villages, Fleur fought a sensation of guilt. Grace and Robin had looked after her together for the last twenty years, before which she and her mother had lived with her grandmother in her grandmother's house on the outskirts of a small North Yorkshire town. Grace had found Robin, who was working at a small carpentry firm nearby, making furniture and fitting out houses and shops. He was in a partnership with two friends, both dope-smoking sixties survivors who had retreated from the city to find a useful, plain way of living. Grace and Robin had fallen in love, searched and found the house they now had in Yarrow St Mary, the area in which Robin had grown up. And there she – they – had lived contentedly; there Fleur had attended the local school, roaming the countryside with her gang of friends.

Later she had been sent to the excellent liberal boarding school her mother had once attended. At school she met Jess and after that had spent time with the Stadlens in the big house in Birmingham they occupied. At first the sheer noise Jess, her brothers and her parents made had shattered her, then, when she was more used to that, it was just their attitudes that surprised her. Jess's father had clothing factories making not only his own brand of skirts, dresses and suits but supplying a major chain store, who put their own label on his garments. The house talk was of trade and contracts, allies and rivals. Sometimes, during emergencies, the boys were dispatched from their commodious home to fill gaps in the factory workforce. “Study for your exams late at night, early in the morning,” Jess's father would tell his protesting sons. “Daytime, while it needs you, you work for the

company which keeps you at college and feeds and clothes you.” It was all very different from Bucknells.

The suburbs of London began, then gradually the air became brighter and more lurid, the houses closer and closer together. As the progress into the impure city atmosphere went on Fleur found it easier to forget about Bucknells and her mother and stepfather.

She climbed the steps to Adelaide House feeling almost satisfied, thinking, I’ve got a home and a job, that’s good enough for now – and saw Dominic standing outside his open front door, talking urgently into a mobile phone. As she advanced she heard him saying, “Please – please – hurry.” He looked at her as if, for the moment, he didn’t know who she was.

“What’s the matter?” Fleur asked.

“It’s Van,” he said, starting back inside. Over his shoulder he said, “It looks like an overdose.”

Fleur, cringing inwardly, followed him. “Is there anything I can do?”

Dominic crouched down beside a mattress on which Vanessa lay motionless. Her face was grey, her eyelids fluttered. Outside the brilliantly coloured oriental bed covering one pale, thin arm dropped. A lamp with a scarf over it burned by the bed. The room was painted dark green, and was poignantly tidy. On a cheap chest of drawers stood a hairbrush, a paperback book and the bear, propped up, with a fresh red ribbon round its throat. There was a poster on the wall – an impressionist painting of a meadow with flowers – a chair on which lay a pair of jeans and leather sandals underneath, side by side.

Dominic crouched down, took Vanessa’s limp hand and started talking to her. “Van – Vanessa – I’m here. You’re going to be all right. Joe’s coming. The ambulance is on its way. Hang in there, Van. We all love you. It’s going to be all right.”

To Fleur Vanessa looked as if she might be dying.

Dominic was massaging Vanessa’s hand. “It’s all right, love. I’m here. You’ll be all right soon.”

“Dominic,” Fleur said from the doorway. “I’ll go down and wait outside – I’ll tell the ambulance men which flat.” She was relieved to have found something to do which kept her out of that room.

Joe, skinny and fast, came running up towards her as she got to the stairs. “What?” he cried, his eyes staring, his face alarmed.

“It’s an overdose, probably,” Fleur told him. “I’m going down to wait for the ambulance.” Before she had finished the sentence he had bolted past her into the flat.

She sat down on the bottom steps where she had a good view of the gates and the road. She was startled when a wet nose was pushed into her hand. She looked at the big black and white dog, Jason, who looked back at her, head on one side. In the distance she heard the faint blaring of the ambulance siren. “They’re here,” she said to the dog.

The ambulance arrived, lights flashing. Fleur stood in the road and pointed them into the area outside the flats, then told the paramedics which flat to go to.

She watched them carry the light stretcher down the steps. There was an oxygen mask over Van’s small face. She must still be alive, at any rate. Joe jumped in and the ambulance moved off.

Dominic watched it go then turned to where Fleur was waiting in the shadows. He bent and put his hand over his eyes. “I’ve got Jason,” Fleur said, moving forward.

“Couldn’t take it, eh, Jase?” Dominic said to the dog. To Fleur he said, “I got him off an addict. He’s seen it all before, when he was a lot younger. Didn’t like it.”

“He’s a very clever dog,” Fleur remarked. She added, “How’s Vanessa doing?”

“I think she’ll be OK,” Dominic said. “I couldn’t go with her. Hospitals make me come over faint. I can’t do anything about it.”

“People always say that,” Fleur said dourly, “as if they thought there was a whole race of other people who love hospitals, can’t get enough of them, go round visiting patients they don’t even know just for the experience.”

“Well, thanks,” said Dominic.

“Think nothing of it.” She turned to go. She relented. “Come over to the wine bar. I’ll get the manager to give you a brandy.”

He hesitated. “I’d rather go to the Findhorn. Come with me. Money’s not a problem.”

No, thought Fleur, crossing the road with him. Money isn’t the problem. It’s where it probably comes from that is. For all she knew it was Dominic’s trade that had put Vanessa’s life in danger. She couldn’t think why she was

going with him, except that somehow that was what you did after an event like that.

She stood beside him while he bought the drinks.

“What was all that about?” said Patrick from behind the bar. He had evidently seen the whole thing through the pub windows.

“Don’t ask,” said Dominic. “Just don’t ask.” This seemed to explain enough to Patrick.

Fleur and Dominic sat down. “Contrary to what you might be thinking,” Dominic said, “I don’t deal in what Vanessa had. I never have. A bit of blow, all right, when I needed to – never smack, or anything. Van got that stuff on her own.”

Fleur wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not. A silence fell.

“I’d better go and ring the hospital,” he said.

“They won’t know anything yet, probably.”

“Make me feel better,” he told her. He went to the phone, Jason following. Fleur sat there gloomily, planning to leave as soon as he got back.

“She’s OK. They’re waiting for the doctor,” Dominic reported when he returned.

“They know what to do without a doctor,” she said. “Look – I’d better go.”

But he was speaking, quickly: “She was getting off it. The local doctor’s very good – she was in a programme. She was down to a bit of methadone a day. Then this. Joe and me were out working. She must have got down and lonely and went out and scored somewhere. Probably on the Yarrow. If we’d been around it probably wouldn’t have happened.”

“She made her own choices,” said Fleur.

Dominic looked at her disbelievingly. “That’s what people like you say, isn’t it? ‘She made her own choices.’ You don’t know anything about Van, do you? You don’t know what choices she ever had to make. You don’t know a thing. You just come out with your little clichés so you don’t have to worry. It’s all somebody else’s fault.”

Fleur got annoyed. “Come on, Dominic. No one held Vanessa down and stuck a needle in her arm.”

“Do you know what?” he said. “You don’t know anything. I hope you never have to find out, the hard way.”

“You know everything, of course.”

“A little bit more than you do, that’s for sure.”

“What the hell,” she said, standing up. “I’m going.”

“Sit down,” he said. “I didn’t mean to insult you. I’m just worried, that’s all. It’d be a help if you stayed,” he admitted.

Fleur sat down. “Has Vanessa got any family?” she asked.

“Her mum, Ellen, lives on the Yarborough Estate, but she and Van don’t get on too well – because of something that happened in the past. Vanessa’s mum’s all right but there’s stuff they can’t put behind them. Basically it’s me and Joe. We’ve usually looked out for her – as much as we could.” He groaned. “It’s so frustrating – when everything was going all right. She could have been straight in six months.”

“She still can.”

“She’ll lose confidence,” he said. “I’ve seen her do it before. You know – self-esteem. She’s never been loaded with that, Vanessa.”

Fleur said, “I’m starving. Do you want some fish and chips?”

They ate from the paper sitting on the grass behind Adelaide House, facing the lighted tower blocks five hundred yards away. The sky above was city dark, the sound of traffic muffled. It was chilly.

“You’ll have had more glamorous dates,” Dominic remarked. “Do you want the rest of those chips?” She handed them over. “May balls,” he continued dreamily. “The Groucho Club. Tea at the Ritz. Long lunches in expensive Italian places with men in cream suits. Little blobs of spinach on the plate – fifty quid a head. Funny how they lean on spinach in those places.”

“You seem well up on it.”

“I used to be homeless around the West End,” he said. “You see a lot.”

“What? You were living on the street?” she asked.

“Yeah – me, Joe and Vanessa. Not always in the street of course. Only when things went bad. Still, I’m no stranger to the doorway, church porch and alley.”

“My God,” Fleur said. She was appalled to think she was sitting here with one of the people she had thought so alien – wasted figures sitting on the pavement with handwritten notices, men and women wrapped up in sleeping bags in doorways, faceless, anonymous as the dead in body bags.

“It was a life,” he said. “It had its compensations, along with the rest. But basically it’s punishing and it has the habit of killing you in the end. So – what happened to you to get you here enjoying this picnic?”

She told him the story of the company, the documentaries, the accounts, her absconding partner.

“So you and the guy were close?” Dominic asked.

“That’s right. Part of me still doesn’t believe he won’t turn up with an answer, several answers, and make it all right.”

“It’s possible,” he said, and crumpling up his fish and chip paper he lobbed it across the grass. Fleur got up and went to get it. As she came back he flashed out his foot and tripped her, then moved to catch her as she fell. Suddenly she was on the ground in the hard arms of this sweaty, fish-and-chip-smelling drop-out. And suddenly she felt happier than she had for months – if not longer.

Dominic pulled her closer and put his soft mouth on hers. Moments later she said, “I can’t do this.”

“You are,” he said and neatly turned her over so that he was lying on top of her. Five minutes later they were entwined, staggering up the stairs of Adelaide House. In the bedroom Dominic shared with Joe they fell on his narrow, neatly made bed. Then came the sound of his belt, her shoes, his shoes hitting the floor.

I must get up, I must get out, was Fleur’s waking thought. It was still dark and she was very comfortable and easy curled against Dominic’s body, but she was worried – worried that she might stay, letting herself in for more of this madness. Then what? Fleur Stockley and this homeless hippie?

Hippie? Petty crook, drug dealer – and yet he was so sweet, she thought; sweeter, calmer, more passionate than Ben, if she had to tell herself the truth. Ben’s attention was always – where? On the future, on the project, on Ben himself. Which, she told herself, was because Ben had a future, had a project, had a brain, had a presence in the world. Not that the result of all that had been so great in the end.

Nevertheless – get up, Fleur, get up, she told herself. There’s nothing for you here. One minute you were walking along the pavement, clean and tidy and pulling yourself together, the next caught up in a tornado, swept up, whirled round and round and landed in a totally different landscape –

surreal, like Oz. She'd never known anything like that before, hadn't known it could happen.

Her mind went back to the previous summer, her row with Jess, her later SOS call to her. They'd met for lunch in a quiet restaurant, far from the all-knowing, all-seeing streets around Soho, and Jess had told her what she knew of the Channel Four deal Ben had secretly made. Fleur was no longer in any mood to attack Jess for her betrayal with Ben. She felt weak and confused, as if she'd been in a traffic accident. She told Jess, "I've got two orders to appear in court for debt, from a company making film and a haulage firm. I'm looking very hard at the fact that my flat's security for the company."

Jess put her head in her hands, groaned and then looked up, saying, "Get to Gerry Sullivan as soon as possible. Do everything – *everything* – he tells you to. He's very good in situations like this."

"It's over, isn't it?" Fleur said.

"Unless Ben turns up tomorrow in a red coat with a big white beard and a sack over his back, yes, I'd say it was over," Jess said. She added, "I must say I'd never have thought Ben would do a thing like this."

"Well, you took the opportunity of studying him at close quarters," Fleur said bitterly. Jess said nothing. "Didn't you?" Fleur asked. "Go on, Jess – didn't you? Don't just sit there as if nothing had happened."

"Oh – whatever," said Jess. "Yes – I did it. I said I did it. But why are you blaming me – just me? What about him?"

Fleur considered this. There was no answer to it. A thought struck her. "How was it, anyway?" she said. "Where did you go?"

"My place. Adrian was away. It was OK."

"OK?" said Fleur.

"Well, Fleur, you know," Jess said, poking at some ratatouille on her plate. She looked up. "You know, Fleur – there's sex – and then there's sex." She looked down again, then up. "Tastes differ, it's one of those things – you know."

Fleur had uneasily agreed, but behind Jess's words found something she didn't care to analyse. It was as if Jess were a renowned gourmet, a person who had eaten at the best restaurants in the world, and Fleur had taken her out for a meal at a perfectly good, nothing-special local restaurant. As if

she'd asked her, "How's the food?" and Jess had replied politely, "Fine. Well – there's food and food, you know."

Fleur had known then that Jess had a point, but she wasn't precisely sure what it was. Now, lying peacefully beside Dominic Floyd, she thought she did know, but didn't want to face it.

Get up. Get out of here, she ordered herself and, reluctantly, eventually complied. You could stay, she told herself as she slid her feet to the floor. More sex in the morning – stagger up – nice walk to the park, feed the ducks – no harm in it. No, she told herself, creeping to the door, hastily gathered clothes under her arm – leave it. One night stand – good friends from now on ...

"You going, darling?" came Dominic's sleepy voice.

"Mm," was all she trusted herself to say.

"Not good enough for you then?" he mumbled.

Did he mean him, himself, or his situation and the place? She knew the answers – yes, he was good enough, more than good enough – and no, his life wouldn't do. She only said, "Own bed – get some sleep. See you soon."

He muttered something and went straight back to sleep. She let herself out into the grey day, with light just coming.

Six

Dear William,

I hope you don't mind me calling you William. Or would you rather I used the whole thing: Sir William Clegg, Chairman and Treasury Representative for the Bank of England Enquiry? I think we were at Downside together, though you must have been four years younger. You've done well, William. You always did, from what I heard, and here you are now, investigating me. Or anyway, you've issued an invitation for me to give evidence at the Bank's Enquiry into the affairs of Strauss Jethro Smith.

I seem to remember a chubby face and a pure soprano voice hitting the chapel rafters while – what was I doing? Thinking about girls, planning an escape route, working out the day's punishment plan for whoever I was bullying at the time?

You've done well, William – twenty-five years later here you are chairing the committee, while I'm sitting here looking out over the wintry sea from my small hotel on the coast. I'm watching an old man in a trilby walking his dog over the wet sand under a moving black and grey sky. It all seems quintessentially English – out-of-season, sea-surrounded, misty-aired English.

This communication of mine will put you in a bit of a quandary, I imagine. It will come to you as a private letter, through your own front door. As such, technically, it will be your private property. You'll be under no legal compulsion to disclose what I'm telling you, though you might think there's a moral one. Not that I'm one to preach morality to my betters. William Clegg – the choice is yours.

Background first – you need to know who it is you're dealing with, who's taking you down roads that you'll wish, before it's over, you'd never started walking on.

Who am I? My name, your Honour, is Sam Hope, and I come from a respectable home; not poor, but honest servants of State and Empire over many generations. I'm ex-army and took a hike in the early eighties, after the Falklands war. I joined up with John Vansittart, who was ex-army himself and had a small private security company. I recruited my own small

corps from the British Army, SAS and elsewhere. We'd stand on the airstrip, me and the lads, ready for Africa, the Balkans or wherever, and when I looked at them the words of the Duke of Wellington reviewing his own troops before Waterloo would ring in my ears – "I don't know what they'll do to the enemy, but by God, they terrify me."

By the later eighties Hope Vansittart Private Security was on covert missions, not abroad but over here, helping to persuade the doughty colliers of the Midlands to set up their own union in opposition to Scar gill's NUM and up north helping the other pitmen to give up their obstinate ways. Previously we'd been guarding oil sheikhs and film stars, and dictators with good reason to fear their own dissident groups. Then there we were in GB, making life a misery for the miners.

This was how Hope Vansittart Private Security – HVPS – came into what you might describe as politics. Funny, really: it was the Falklands that got me out of the army and the miners' strike which put me on the path to the best part of my fortune. Ultimately, you might say, the Lady made me.

Since then, William, I've been a non-attributable resource, buried deep in your firm's books. Thus the private schools for my children, the big house in Twickenham with the Thames running sweetly at the end of my garden, the blonde-streaked wife with the discontented expression called, as you might guess, Fiona. I met her at Vansittart's third wedding. After that one, unable to face any more alimony, he fled. He now lives elsewhere, drawing his dividends via the Turks and Caicos Islands. Even if you could find him he couldn't give you any help. He's been out of the business for ten years.

Anyway there was I, five years ago when this affair started, MD of HVPS, charming wife, two adorable blonde kiddies, nice house and, as far as family and neighbours were concerned, the model of respectability.

I had a small factory near Preston which made the security equipment. It was a cover to disguise the other parts of my work, of course, and handy for filtering through unusual sums of money. It's a major problem of our times, isn't it, William? Not how to get hold of the money, but how to explain it afterwards.

Where did it come from, this income of about forty times what your average bus driver will get every year for his nine, ten, eleven, twelve-hour day? Guarding people and property accounted for about a third. The remainder came from my little set-up's work as an NGO – non-governmental organisation, working alongside governments or for them

and receiving payment from them. Think of Oxfam or Save the Children. Then think of me, the evil, the unsanctified, the unadmitted NGO.

Think of a place where the native people want to go on leading their simple lives, fishing in the river, hunting and eating the local wildlife, drawing water, cutting wood for the fires, planting crops. Simple, Arcadian, backed by the good NGOs. Then think of a government who wants to mine minerals, uranium, oil and so on, at the same time keeping in with the multinational who will most likely be involved, build some airports, buy some planes and some weapons and put something prudently aside in private accounts in Switzerland. This is where the lads and I come in – hired to make sure life's not worthwhile for the simple indigenes standing in the way of international trade and the personal enrichment of interested parties. I turn up with my boys to go through a few villages at night killing and setting houses on fire, or assassinate the local leaders, or poison the water supply so that people have to roll up their blankets and move on. We do what the job demands.

Or take a little island not far from a bigger one. This island is split into two bits, one small bit owing allegiance to the big island, the other autonomous. Only a lot of people in the small bit want to link up with the autonomous side. And what a mess the place has become. Awash with drugs, arms and money, crammed with

spies, patriots, traitors, infiltrators, collaborators, double – triple – agents. Who do you call on to do some of the dirty work? Good old Sam, rogue-element, never-heard-of-him-before-in-my-life Hope, that's who. I tell you, in the end I didn't know whether I was working for MI5, MI6, the IRA, the Unionists or Che Guevara.

Well, I'd always known it had to end, one way or another. That was why I left bundles of cash in different places. But I must say, although I knew something, sometime, would give, I'm a bit surprised by what it turned out to be. I suppose you always are. To think that stupid little job years ago, done just to oblige and involving three hopeless down-and-outs, could lead to all this – your Enquiry, me having to disappear and all the other consequences. It's a funny old world, and no mistake.

So – now to our muttons, as the slaughterman said...

Seven

Fleur woke up next morning and suddenly remembered she was supposed to let in the man who was going to inspect the wine bar's oven.

There was no noise from the flat next door and as she hastily showered and combed her hair Fleur told herself the night with Dominic had been brought on by the shock of Vanessa's near-death experience. Death and sex were closely linked in the human mind, she told herself, as were fear and sex, food and sex, chocolate and sex. It seemed the only things not connected with sex were Radio Four, matching sets of saucepans, income tax and National Insurance. So that was what it was, she told herself: Dominic's desire for comfort because of Vanessa's being in hospital, and both their horror at someone young being so close to death. That was it, Fleur said to herself. Definitely. She ran across the road to the wine bar.

It was a bad day. A smell of old food, stale drink and tobacco hit her the moment she opened the door. The floor was tacky underfoot, the bar was littered with bottles and unwashed glasses and there was a heap of dirty dishes in the kitchen, too. Even Al hadn't loaded the dishwasher the previous night, as he normally did.

She started clearing up and half an hour later the engineer arrived and declared the gas stove out of action. He put a long warning sticker across it, declaring it unfit for use.

She called Geoff to tell him but he didn't answer so she left a message on his machine. She phoned Mr Housman and left another message, then found Al's number under the bar and called that, too. The extremely posh and very brisk man who answered the phone told her he was Al's brother and that Al was already on his way to the wine bar.

Al came in not long after. Fleur told him about the oven and they treated themselves to a decent coffee, made from a bag Al had brought in. "I thought it'd be nice," he told her, "for when we had a moment."

"We've certainly got a moment now," Fleur said.

"That's for sure," he agreed.

"You look rough," Fleur said.

"I had a hard night," he said. "You look a bit – different."

She told him about Vanessa's overdose. He said, "Oh, God, she'll have to pick herself up and start again."

Fleur looked at him. He sounded as if he knew something about it.

He caught her glance, read her mind and said, "Yeah – well – that's all over now." Then he added, looking round, "Let's face it, this place is looking about as good as we feel. And Geoff's taking something off the top. There's always more money going out of the till than there ought to be. I haven't seen Housman for weeks, unless he's coming in in the early hours of the morning, like a vampire. If Geoff doesn't turn up by half-past, I'm going to call it a day. I'm used to having nothing to cook but now there's nothing to cook on. It's getting ridiculous."

At this point Mr Housman came in wearing his long black coat and carrying his briefcase. His square face was sagging. He looked pointedly at Al and Fleur sitting down and at the dustpan and brush Fleur had left on another table.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

"The kitchen stove's broken down. The gas man's condemned it till it's repaired."

"Where's Geoff?" Housman asked.

"I don't know," Al told him. "Fleur's left a message on his answering machine."

"You could use the microwave for the cooking," Housman said, and, looking at Fleur, added, "and you could get the place looking tidy."

"When you took me on there was a cleaner here," Fleur pointed out.

Housman stood in the middle of the floor, still holding his briefcase. He looked angrily at Al and Fleur. "I don't pay you to sit down drinking coffee."

Fleur spoke up. "Mr Housman," she said, "this place does make money. But we're always operating on a shoestring. It wastes time and it's more expensive."

Housman responded predictably. "Leave the management to me and get a broom and do your job." Fleur didn't move.

Housman glared at her, opened his briefcase, took out a mobile phone and went over to the bar. He pulled out a big bunch of labelled keys, opened one till and stared inside expressionlessly. He slammed it shut and opened the other. His face hardened. He glared at Al.

“Where’s the cash?” he demanded.

“Geoff must have taken it,” Al said.

“Did you see him?” asked Housman. His eyes went suspiciously from Al to Fleur and back.

“He was still here when I left last night,” said Al. “He told me to go early. And Fleur was off. Look, Mr Housman, if anything’s missing would I be sitting here now?”

“You might or you might not,” Housman said.

“Perhaps he decided to clear the till at night and take the money to the bank early,” Al commented.

Housman just stood glaring at him.

“Did he take the cheques?” Al continued.

Housman hesitated and finally answered, “No. He hasn’t.”

A fly buzzed. Al coughed and pulled a tin from the pocket of his white jacket. He opened it and started to roll a cigarette.

No one liked to point out that if Geoff had been going to pay the takings into the bank he would have taken the cheques as well.

Housman went behind the bar and called the bank, asking when the last payment had been made in to the wine bar’s account. The answer evidently gave him no comfort. Meanwhile he continued to eye Al and Fleur as if they had done something wrong, but he didn’t know what it was. He then called another number and left a message for Geoff to ring him urgently.

“What do you know about this?” he said harshly to Fleur and Al.

Al stood up. “Mr Housman,” he said, “I’m not too happy about standing here and listening to you accusing—”

“What have I accused you of?” demanded Housman. “Don’t tell me I’m making accusations.”

“You want to, though,” said Al. “So – Geoff paid me before I left so I don’t owe you anything and you don’t owe me anything, so as from this moment I don’t work for you any more.”

Fleur stood up, too. “And neither do I,” she told Housman.

Al went into the kitchen to get his odds and ends while Fleur waited awkwardly and Housman stood there, not looking at her.

“Fancy a swift half in the Findhorn?” Al asked her once they were outside.

Fleur shrugged. "Why not?"

Patrick was only just opening up as they arrived. "What happened?" he asked.

Al outlined the situation at the wine bar and Patrick laughed. "There'll be a rush here at lunchtime," he predicted. Giving them their drinks, he added, "I always thought that Geoff looked dodgy."

When they were sitting down Fleur gazed into space, remembering Vanessa on the stretcher, sitting on the grass with Dominic, Dominic's bed. She felt dazed.

"We can't say we didn't see it coming," Al remarked.

"You got enough in to make a few extra sandwiches lunchtime?" Patrick called back into the kitchen.

"No," a voice called back.

The voice started grumbling.

"Go up the shops and get some, then," Patrick called.

"What are you going to do?" Fleur asked Al.

"Looks like a visit to the Job Centre is on the cards," Al told her. "You?"

"I don't know," she said. "Funnily enough, I liked that job, in a way."

They heard a police car come past and stop nearby. Al smiled, then finished his beer and stood up. "I think I'll disappear. Housman's dying to find somebody to blame. I don't fancy it just now – I'll let them find me."

They exchanged phone numbers and Al left. Fleur went on sitting there for a while, then did the same. She went back to Adelaide House. There was nowhere else to go except the Job Centre and she didn't feel up to the inquisition they'd put her through.

Betty Simmons caught her on the landing as she put her key in the lock. "What went on last night?" she asked.

"Vanessa took an overdose," Fleur reported, knowing Mrs Simmons already knew, or guessed.

"Is she all right?"

"She seems to be," Fleur answered.

"I knew it," Betty Simmons declared. "Drugs. You've only to look at them. This is only the start – police, ambulances, all-night parties. Doug's still on at the council to get rid of them. The Town Hall's quite sympathetic but sympathy won't get us anywhere. If they don't go our lives will be a

living hell. They're not supposed to keep a dog here, either. Doug's brought that up, too."

Fleur winced. Whatever you might say about the others, she thought, Jason was a perfectly decent neighbour. Betty, disappointed by Fleur's passivity, added, "I don't suppose you realise what people like that next door can do to the value of your property."

All Fleur could manage was, "Yes. I see what you mean." Then she added, "I must go in. I'm out of a job – the wine bar's just closed down."

"I saw the police," Betty Simmons said.

"It looks as if the manager's gone off with last night's takings," Fleur said.

"Oh dear. First that girl – now this – you be careful, dear. Things often go in threes."

Fleur nodded, went in, sat down, stood up and realised she had no idea what to do next. She thought of Ben, thought of her empty life and was on the verge of taking her troubles back to bed with her when she thought better of it. She couldn't return to all that again, she thought. She'd end up on anti-depressants. So she rang Jess and said she wanted to talk to her about jobs. Jess suggested lunch.

Eight

“You did *what*?” exclaimed Jess in horror.

Although they were eating in an old-fashioned Italian restaurant just off Oxford Street, where the tables were quite widely separated, Fleur saw a man turn round when he heard Jess’s anguished voice.

Jess was still talking, though in a slightly lower tone. “I can’t believe it – this isn’t like you. It’s completely out of character.” She paused, aghast, as another thought struck her. “You might have caught anything – anything at all. Have you considered that?”

“I have, actually,” Fleur admitted.

“Oh, my God,” Jess said, appalled. “Well – please don’t do it again. I’m begging you.”

“I don’t suppose I will,” said Fleur, but suddenly had a memory, a physical memory, of Dominic’s mouth, his hands upon her.

Jess, her oldest friend, read her mind. “You’re a bit old to be like this, aren’t you? I don’t like that little repressed smirk on your face. You know where it could end up, don’t you? We’re talking street people – unprotected sex with all and sundry, dirty needles, the lot.”

“I know what we’re talking about,” Fleur told her. There was no defence. What Jess said was perfectly true. She had been reckless and there could be a big price to pay. The biggest.

“It’s time you got out of there,” Jess announced. “Call it a phase, something you had to do when you did it. I don’t know about any proper jobs just now but you can do *something*. Can’t Grace and Robin let you have some money?”

“They haven’t got any,” said Fleur.

“They must have – look at how they live,” Jess said. She raised her eyebrows and looked straight at Fleur. “I bet he’s got a tattoo.”

Fleur looked down.

“He has!” Jess crowed. “What is it? ‘Love’ and ‘hate’ on his knuckles? Union Jack on his bum? Come on – give.” She frowned suspiciously. “It isn’t a swastika, is it?”

“It’s just a butterfly,” Fleur mumbled.

“How sweet,” Jess mocked. “Where is it?”

“On his shoulder.”

“Right – I’m getting the picture. But listen to me, Fleur, this is over – right? Don’t get sucked in.”

Fleur was getting impatient. “Thanks for the advice. Look, Jess, I’m trying to find a job. Are you sure there’s nothing? I’m not fussy.”

Jess admitted, “If I’d heard of anything I’d be thinking about myself.” She dropped her voice. “Debs is up to something. I don’t know what it is but I know it’s happening. Someone I know saw her going into a hotel with an executive from Paramount. I got her PA to give me her phone bill. I said something had gone wrong with my billing and I needed to check. She’s been ringing the same number in California a lot so I rang it myself – it was Henry Veneto’s office. There was another number that came up several times, too. A French investment bank.”

“You think she’s putting Camera Shake on the market?” asked Fleur.

“Either that, or she’s going to sell shares in it and realise a big sum. That means another management.”

“It’s hard to believe,” Fleur said. Debs Smith, barely five foot two in her high heels, had started the firm by mortgaging her own flat and her old mother’s house in Beverley ten years earlier. She had succeeded. Camera Shake was responsible for two game shows and three successful series on the BBC and independent television. Debs had three BAFTA awards. She lived on lettuce, mineral water and adrenalin and worked a fifteen-hour day.

“There’s a vague rumour,” reported Jess, who sucked up rumours like a vacuum cleaner. “It says Peter’s been playing away from home.”

“Peter never leaves home,” Fleur said, thinking of mild, bespectacled Peter Smith, who ran Debs’ home and the three children Debs had put into his caring arms almost as soon as she’d had them.

“Keep your voice down,” Jess warned. “Well,” she continued, “it was at home, so to speak. The lady who ran the play group one of the little Smiths went to. Trust a man – he’ll find a way somehow.” She glanced at Fleur, who decided not to point out that *she*, Jess, had also found a way, with her, Fleur’s, lover.

Jess went on hastily, “Anyway, Debs isn’t going to let Peter go and that’s the only thing which would persuade her to relax her grip on Camera

Shake. Without him she could never have done what she has. And if there was a divorce, of course, he'd end up with half. So she's got good reason for getting out, or selling a big percentage of the firm. Or launching it as a public company."

"Phew," said Fleur.

"So now you can see why I'm watching my back."

Fleur pondered, "If either of us had any capital we could set up on our own."

"I know, darling," Jess said, patting her hand across the table, "but we haven't, have we? And Ben's made sure your name's mud at the bank."

On this sad note their lunch ended. On the train back to Cray Hill Fleur faced facts and decided she'd better try to get herself on a course to upgrade her computer skills with a view to finding a reasonably paid job. A glamorous career as an independent film producer had fallen to pieces in her hands and so had her recent, less glamorous career in a wine bar. Winter was coming on, the mortgage needed paying and her own bills were coming in. It might not be too long before more Verity creditors caught up with her. And that could mean bankruptcy. She had to do something sensible.

As soon as she got in her doorbell rang. If it's Dominic, she thought, Jess's warnings ringing in her ears, I'll tell him it's over.

One look into his desperate eyes told her he had not come courting.

"What's the matter?" she said instantly.

"Vanessa's dead."

Fleur's knees went weak. She clutched the door frame, whispering, "No – oh no."

"Can I come in?" he asked. She let him in and followed him into the front room. "We went to see her last night, Joe and me," he said flatly. "And she was fine – they said she was fine and we gave her the bear. She was OK. She said she was sorry and that, and she wouldn't do it again. She'd straighten out. And her mum was there talking about keeping on with the programme. We thought everything was all right. Just a blip. Joe said it could be a good thing, teach her a lesson and she'd try harder." He flopped down into a chair. "Then at two in the morning Ellen rang up. Her mother. Something had gone wrong with Van's heart, suddenly. They couldn't save her. They don't really know what it was yet. But the thing is, she's dead. It happened."

“How old was she?” Fleur asked.

“Twenty-one,” he said.

“Where’s Joe?” she asked.

“He’s with Van’s mum, Ellen. There’s lots of people there, helping.”

Fleur sat on the arm of the chair and put her arm round him, not knowing what to say. “Do you want a cup of tea?” she offered.

“Be nice,” he said. “Sorry to turn up – I thought you ought to know.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said. She went out and put the kettle on and came back into the room, where an enormous silence seemed to have fallen. “Whose girlfriend was she, yours or Joe’s?” she asked.

He looked at her hard. “Van wasn’t anybody’s girlfriend,” he said at last. “She didn’t like sex. Not after her stepfather.”

“Oh God,” said Fleur. “Oh God.” She sat down and hung her head.

“She was only ten,” Dominic told her. “Van’s mother kicked him out as soon as she found out. But it was too late – the damage was done and it never got put right. Van wasn’t tough. She wasn’t a survivor, just a casualty. Still, she might have made it, if it wasn’t for a couple of other things – including that dealer.”

“Do you know who it was?” Fleur asked.

“I do now. He lives on the Yarborough. He went to the same primary school as Van and Joe. Joe and me’ll look after him later.”

“You will?” said Fleur, imagining, with a tremor, a turf war, with guns circling Adelaide House.

“There’s a lot of feeling about this on the Yarborough,” Dominic said. “This isn’t all he’s done.” He looked up at her hopelessly. “What can you say? He’s guilty, but so’s the bloke who supplied him, and the bloke who supplied him, all the way to Afghanistan or wherever. There’s probably someone living in a big country house with a swimming pool who’s just as responsible. We can’t get at him. And if we could, what’s the difference? It won’t bring Vanessa back. She could have made it, that’s what I keep on thinking.” He put his head on his hands. Fleur heard him sob before he lifted his head up quickly, tears on his cheeks. “Sorry.”

“You’ve got to talk to somebody,” she said.

“I’m talking to you, aren’t I? What do you want me to do, see some wanky grief counsellor? I’m taking it differently to Joe, that’s all. Joe’s just angry, that’s how it’s coming out in him. I can’t be angry. I keep thinking, if

only we hadn't been out that night, when she went out and scored the heroin. If only we hadn't both been out, she might still be alive."

"There's not much point in saying you can't fix the blame and then blaming it all on yourself," Fleur said sternly and went off to make the tea. A voice inside her said that the person really responsible for Vanessa's death was Vanessa – she'd put the needle in her arm, not anyone else.

When she came back into the room Dominic was still sitting in the same position, staring into space. As she handed him the cup he said, "Thanks. I'll just have this and go."

"Where to?" she asked.

"There's always somewhere." He added, "You know, when we moved in we were over the moon. We told Van it would be all right. We could start over, get straight and go straight if that was what it took. We were too old and too tired to live on the streets any more. The fun had gone out of it – wheeling, dealing, screwing around and getting by. Well, it didn't work, did it?"

"It was an accident, Dom. Everybody in the wrong place at the wrong time—"

"Maybe," he said, standing up, adding more harshly, "Fucking junkies – most of them die in the end, anyway."

The doorbell rang and when Fleur answered Joe was there. "I'm looking for Dominic—"

"He's here," Fleur told him. Joe went straight past her and stood in front of him, skinny in his jeans and leather jacket, chalk-white and coiled like a spring. "I don't like it," he said. "Brendan's disappeared. He had a huge roll of cash on him, his brother said—"

"He wasn't going to stand around, was he?" Dominic replied wearily. "He's not exactly popular now. He knew there'd be trouble."

"No," said Joe urgently, "a *big* roll of cash. Thousands and thousands."

"So what are you saying, Joe?" he asked.

"You know what I'm saying. Vanessa went out and scored. Not for the first time. Only this time she's dead. And Brendan's loaded."

"I know she's dead," Dominic said flatly. "Van was a junkie. She's dead. It's not a new story. But you're not doing yourself any favour with this conspiracy theory, mate. Displacement, that's what it's called."

"Dom!" Joe cried.

Dominic said desperately, “Joe – I can’t stand this. You’re making everything worse.”

“What about that guy who was looking for us three?”

“Years ago – years. There’s always some bugger looking for some other bugger,” Dominic said furiously. “You’re mental, Joe, raving.” He stood up and put his arms round Joe. “Give it a rest, Joe. Let it go. Just let it go. Let’s bury Vanessa, let it go.”

He stood up and led Joe out, though Fleur could see from Joe’s stance and the angry, determined look on his face that Dominic’s words had made no impression on him. Dominic muttered, “Thanks, Fleur,” and they were gone.

Unable to bear being in the flat alone, next door to the empty flat, to which Vanessa would never return, Fleur went off to the Job Centre and volunteered for an advanced computer course to enhance her own, largely self-taught skills. She’d have to pluck up courage and ask her parents to lend her the money to cover the mortgage for a little while. She dreaded making the phone call to ask for the money.

When the phone rang she thought the caller might be her mother. She drew a deep breath before she answered, “Hullo?” The phone went down.

She stood there for a moment, wondering exactly how frequently these silent phone calls had been made to her since she’d moved in. Once a week? Twice? Was that normal? Perhaps it depended on how close your phone number was to that of the local hospital, pizza delivery service or vet. But she still thought the caller might be Ben checking up.

She told herself she couldn’t start thinking about Ben, with everything else slipping, her morale so precarious and the call to her mother still unmade.

She almost groaned aloud as she picked up the phone and rang Grace. “Lovely to hear from you – how are you?” came her mother’s light, pleasant voice.

Fleur launched straight in, telling her mother that the wine bar had collapsed, she was out of work and needed a loan towards the mortgage until she could get herself a proper well-paid job.

“Oh dear,” her mother said, dismayed. “Oh, Fleur. We would like to help, but life here *is* getting rather expensive—”

“Oh well, forget it,” Fleur broke in grumpily, resenting the fact that she’d put herself in this bad position, resenting the fact that Grace hadn’t offered to pawn the silver to help her. Other people managed, she supposed. They had to. “It’s OK,” she said. “I’ll get some part-time work.” If there is any, she thought.

“Let me talk to Robin,” her mother said.

“No – it’s too difficult. I’ll manage.”

“Be fair, Fleur. You know I’m not in charge of our finances. Robin does all that. You know we’ll help if we can. Do give me time to talk to him.”

“All right, thank you,” Fleur said flatly. She tried to inject some life into her voice. “Thanks, Grace.”

“I’ll ring this evening, after I’ve talked to Robin,” her mother said reassuringly. Then rather spoilt it by saying in a helpless voice, “Oh dear, Fleur. Haven’t things gone wrong since Ben left?”

“Don’t worry,” said Fleur, putting the phone down. Surely her mother couldn’t still believe, after what Fleur had told her, that all would have been well if Ben had stayed? That if she, Fleur, had not carelessly mislaid him the business would be thriving, bills paid, the future as bright with promise as a newly minted guinea? She almost hoped Robin would veto the idea of lending her the money. Only the thought of appearing not just broke but stupid prevented her from picking up the phone and telling Grace she didn’t want the money any more. “Oh, sod it,” she said aloud. Evening was coming on. She had nowhere to go and nothing to do and she wished she was anywhere but where she was.

When her doorbell went she answered it in a low mood and found Dominic outside with a thin woman in her forties.

“This is Ellen, Vanessa’s mother,” he said. “Do you want to come over the Findhorn for a drink with us?”

The invitation was an odd one. She glanced at Ellen to see if this woman, who had just lost her daughter, was happy about the idea of spending the evening in a pub with a total stranger. But Ellen’s face, pale with large, beautiful but heavily circled dark eyes, betrayed no hesitation. Stunned, disoriented probably, thought Fleur, but she picked up her bag and went off with them.

As they went down the steps, Dominic in front, she said awkwardly to Ellen, “I’m very sorry – about Vanessa.” And Ellen said, “I’ve been afraid

of this for so long. And then, when I thought it might be all right at last – that was when it came.”

Now Dominic was crossing the road on his long, wiry legs, metres ahead of them, as if they were racing. “He’s having a lot of trouble dealing with this,” Ellen said in her clear, low voice. “He thought he’d saved her. He takes on too much responsibility.”

Fleur just said, “Yes.”

They sat down silently. Fleur guessed Dominic had invited her along to ease the strain of being alone with the bereaved Ellen. She didn’t know what to do. She asked, “Does Vanessa’s father know about it?”

“I phoned him in Ireland. He’s coming over for the funeral,” Ellen told her. She added, “It may be hard. He’s already blaming me.”

“Joe and me’ll take care of him,” Dominic promised.

“He’ll manage to have his say, anyway,” Ellen predicted. “It’ll be his way of getting through it.”

There was something unnerving to Fleur about Ellen’s composure. Was it only that for so long she’d expected her daughter to die or was she just holding everything in for the sake of those around her?

“Is anybody staying with you?” Fleur asked.

“A friend from work. She’s being very supportive.”

“Ellen works for Social Services,” Dominic told her.

“Oh – right,” Fleur said. “What’s your main area?”

“Children,” Ellen said, iron in her tone, “children at risk.”

There was nothing Fleur could say to this.

Ellen spoke to Dominic. “Joe seems a little bit paranoid. He thinks someone’s been coming after you and they may have had a hand in Vanessa’s death.”

Dominic shook his head. “Joe’s seen too many movies. He needs someone to blame, that’s all. To make him feel better. When we find Brendan we’ll get to the truth, but there won’t be any surprises. It was an accident, that’s all, an accident.”

Joe came into the pub. He said to Ellen, “Your husband’s at the flat. I said I’d try to find you.”

Ellen frowned, sighed, picked up a big handbag and stood up. “I’ve got to face him sooner or later.” She asked Joe, “Did he say where he was

staying?” and Joe replied carefully, “He seems to think he’s staying with you at the flat.”

“Why aren’t I surprised?” Ellen said.

After she’d gone Joe said, “She doesn’t need him. He’s crying all over the place. Which, considering he’s been gone fifteen years, is a bit ironic.”

“What isn’t at the moment?” Dominic said hopelessly. “But Joe, if you’re going to start plunging into that Oliver Stone video in your head right now I don’t know what I’m going to do to you.”

“You’ll soon start wondering if I’m right,” Joe said. “But I’ve got to stop my unremitting quest for truth and justice because, Dom, if one of us don’t get over to that guy in Islington and plumb in his bath, we’ve got nothing left; we stand no chance of getting paid.”

“Right,” Dominic said, “Thanks, Joe.”

Joe left and he explained, “We’re doing up this house in Islington, only the money’s coming slowly, if at all. The man doesn’t want to pay. And we haven’t turned up because of Vanessa.”

“Ellen seems very calm,” Fleur said. “It’s a bit frightening.”

“She knows all the rules, about grief and that. She got into social work after her second husband raped Vanessa. Not that she’ll ever stop blaming herself, though she might say she has. She talks as if she can come to terms with it, but that’s just her trade talking.”

“Poor woman. How do people bear it?” Fleur said.

“Because they have to, I guess.” His tone changed. “So – what about you and me?”

“Yes,” Fleur replied in a discouraged tone. Looking back, their night together had begun to seem like a dance in the ruins.

“Just a fling as far as you were concerned? A bit of slumming?”

“It doesn’t feel – I don’t seem—” Fleur blundered out.

“You’re right,” he said quickly. “This isn’t the time or the place. I’m glad we got that cleared up. Makes it easier.” He looked at his watch. “I have to get back. My mobile’s flat. I’m expecting a phone call.”

Jason had escaped. He joined them enthusiastically in the pub, wagging his tail. Halfway across the street he barked. Dominic cocked his head, listening. “The phone!” he said, taking off.

Fleur meandered back after them. She thought she might have hurt Dominic’s feelings and wished she hadn’t. But was there an alternative?

Jess had scared her – the relationship had no future – what else could she have done? She sighed and walked through the metal gates and the concrete area which stood in front of Adelaide House. She had only just observed a gleaming black Rolls Royce outside the garages when a man appeared from the shadows in front of them with alarming suddenness. “Fleur,” he said. “We’ve been looking for you.”

Nine

Well, William, I won't be turning up to give evidence at the Enquiry. I doubt if that's the plan of those who named me, either. What they want is someone to blame in my absence, the absence being an admission of guilt. I'll come in nicely as the named culprit in this affair – a rogue element conducting rogue operations, a dubious character in a dubious line of work, known to consort with bad characters like drug dealers, arms traders and British Members of Parliament.

I'm going off for a few years to a warm spot with a nice woman and plenty of money, though at the moment I'm still staring out over the turbulent briny on a greyish day. The old bloke's down there on the beach again with his ancient Labrador. Though fat and not agile, it's been enjoying itself on the sand.

All this puts me in an unusually contemplative frame of mind – so I'll begin at the beginning.

I was sitting in my office, two floors of an old building above a coin dealer in Bond Street, when my secretary, the invaluable Veronica, told me Adrian Pugh was outside. Adrian Pugh was – and is, unless he's decided to duck out and ask for a transfer, which might be wise – a bespectacled pipsqueak of a principal at the Home Office. Meaning he was high up enough to have initiated what he was doing – or not. A comfortable position. I knew him through some discussions I'd been involved in at the Home Office concerning security, acting at that point as Samuel Hope of HVPS, of course, not Samuel Hope and his Mercenary Band. Anyway, Pugh had been there, looking keen, which was probably why he'd been deputed to come. You might ask, who was the leader in this affair? The answer is, I don't know. But now I think anyone could have been telling Pugh what to do, from the top down.

Pugh was a reasonable choice, just high enough on the totem pole to be trusted and to command my attention, not high enough to take any real responsibility for his actions. I was a bit surprised he hadn't made an appointment, but I suppose he wanted to keep it all casual and off the record. Cover his arse, in other words. So in he came in his M&S suit,

carrying a heavy-looking briefcase labelled HMG, the bespectacled swot personified.

I went: sit down, a coffee, what can I do you for, all the time observing that Pugh was a little twitchy, not sure of his ground. But I'm used to twitchy people, even on the legit side of the business.

"Basically," he said, "we're interested in finding three people. We just want to know where they are and we don't want to waste police time. Someone suggested you were the man for the job."

It was not for me to point out that it would have been cheaper to waste a lot of police time looking for these individuals, rather than pay my fees, which are not cheap. If I had, he would probably have given me that standard bureaucratic reply, "Different budgets." However, I didn't believe not wasting police time was really the issue.

"Do you think they're in this country?" I asked him.

"As far as we know."

"So – who are they?" said I.

Which was when I first heard those fatal six words – Dominic Floyd, Joe Carter, Vanessa Whitcombe.

"We don't know too much about them," he told me. "They're young people we need to find for reasons which shouldn't concern you too much. Your job would be just to locate them and tell us where they are. Not too complicated. It's non-political," he added reassuringly.

"Animal rights?" I hazarded. "Road rebels?"

"Just an ordinary criminal matter," he said. "They've conducted a burglary and the police can't find them. We want them."

"Yes," I said. I asked, "Who got robbed?" A Cabinet minister in a male brothel was my guess.

"All you need to know is that a flat in the West End was burgled, certain items were taken, the owner wants them back. The police have so far failed to find the culprits."

Three anonymous robbers, the girl used as sexual bait, compromising pictures taken. Or documents removed and held for ransom, I speculated. "Discretion essential, I suppose?"

"That's why people come to you, Mr Hope," he told me. "The problem seems to be that all three were and apparently still are people of no fixed abode. This presents problems for the police."

“Homeless?” I asked him.

“Yes, that’s so,” he confirmed, glum and serious as a dissenting minister. “It has to be said we’re not absolutely certain these three were the individuals who conducted the crime.”

“I see,” said I, leaving a long pause into which I hoped he would throw some gratuitous information. But he was too wily for that. He hadn’t got to where he was without learning how to sit there, silent as a bespectacled Buddha, for years at a time if need be.

“I can’t help feeling, Mr Pugh, that you aren’t revealing all the information you have about this matter. That is your right, but I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that the more I know about the situation, the faster I will be able to deal with it. It’s not wise to retain the services of those you hope will help you without disclosing all the facts. Can you, for example, tell me who was robbed?”

“I’ve been asked not to give you the relevant information until you’ve undertaken the case,” he told me. “After that I understand you’re bound by the Official Secrets Act.”

It was indeed true that I was so bound by that innocent-looking bit of paper without which I could not get Government jobs.

“I think I ought to be clear about who I’m working for,” I said.

“The Home Office, naturally.”

“Yes. But who would I be reporting to?”

“To me, actually,” he said without pleasure.

Oh Lord, I thought. Pugh was so obviously a man with a wealth of knowledge and absolutely no understanding, or, to put it another way, a man with no common sense at all, or, to put it yet another way, you wouldn’t let him take your dog for a walk. Men like Pugh go from prep to public school, from there to university and from there to Whitehall without ever touching the ground. Reporting to Pugh would be like reporting to Zozik from the planet Blank Nevertheless, it never pays to refuse a small job from a big employer, so I said to Pugh, “Fair enough. I’ll do it.”

If only I’d got that girl in Soho to do my I Ching that day – if only.

Pugh said, “Good. Now, Hope, I want you to understand that this must be dealt with by as few people as possible. By you alone, in fact.”

This is a standard request from clients, no problem being so serious, so confidential, so potentially interesting to others as one’s own. “Of course,”

I responded smoothly. "Terms are normally handled by my secretary, who knows nothing more of the business." This was completely untrue. The firm would have collapsed if Veronica hadn't known everything. "So," I continued, "what have you got for me?"

He opened his case and handed me a skinny buff file. I felt his eyes on me as I scanned the little information the file contained. There was a report of a burglary from the house of a David Hamilton at 5 Gordon Mews, which runs off Welbeck Street, about half a mile from where we were sitting. The goods taken were described as four silver snuff boxes, a gold signet ring and £500 in cash. A brief report from the West End Central the previous November – it was now May – stated that from the information received the reporting officer, Inspector Franks, believed the suspects in the robbery to be Dominic Floyd, Joe Carter and Vanessa Whitcombe, all NFA, all having been looked for but not found in London and all otherwise untraceable.

"I'll do the best I can," I told Pugh. "First I'll go and talk to Inspector Franks."

"I thought I'd made it plain you should work alone," Pugh said. "All our technical resources are open to you, but we don't want any other individuals involved."

"I understand," said I mendaciously, and after various hand-shakes and assurances of mutual esteem Pugh departed and I sat back, put my feet on the desk and lit a cigarette. Then I rang Charlie Franks at West End Central, gave him the facts and figures concerning the theft and wondered if he was available for lunch.

And so I began work on what I had little doubt was the cover-up of some sordid misdemeanour or stupid blunder which the Government would find damaging if revealed.

I was surprised to find that the three – Floyd, Carter and Whitcombe – were not claiming DSS payments at that time. Though not too surprised, because they came from a world where false names aren't uncommon. So they could have been registered under other names.

I checked their police records and found that Floyd and Carter had been done eighteen months earlier for dealing drugs out of a place in North London and got suspended sentences, while the girl, Vanessa, had been caught shoplifting a year before that and got another suspended sentence.

There were three addresses on the file: Dominic Floyd's was a farm in County Mayo, Joe Carter's was a children's home in north-west London and Vanessa Whitcombe's was what looked like a council estate not too far from the children's home.

I drove to the estate which had been Vanessa Whitcombe's last known address and rang the doorbell of a neatly curtained flat on the sixth floor of a tower block. No one answered. I stood there a bit until an old lady appeared from behind a heavily chained and locked front door, gave me a suspicious look and asked me if I was anything to do with the delivery of a new couch.

Being sofa-less there was no point in claiming to be a delivery man. I said, "No. I'm looking for Vanessa Whitcombe."

"You won't find her here," said the old bird, eyeing me beadily.

"Does her family still live here?" I asked.

"Who are you?" she responded.

"Probation Services," I lied.

She looked me up and down and priced my leather jacket. "Let's have a look at your ID," she demanded.

"It's in the car," I told her. "If she's not here, can I get in touch with her mother?"

She looked at me hard, then said a phone number, which I wrote down.

When I rang the number a voice said, "Social Services." I asked for Ms Whitcombe and heard she was interviewing a client. Did I want to leave a message? Definitely not. I'd told the old girl I was from the Probation Services, and the girl's mother was a social worker.

I rang George Hopkins, an unfrocked copper who sometimes worked for me, and asked him to take on a five-day job watching the flat on the estate – the Yarborough in Cray Hill – to see if the missing Vanessa Whitcombe or any of the others were around, and report on anything else of interest.

Then I went back to the office and, later, home to the lovely Fiona. About ten words were usually spoken on either side during the course of an evening, unless she wanted money, or there was something to do with the kids. And so another evening passed in the happy home.

Next day Charlie Franks and I sat down in an atmosphere of hearty good grub. As soon as we'd ordered I asked him what he knew about the robbery in Gordon Mews. He told me – nothing. There was nothing to know. The

owner of the flat, David Hamilton, self-described as company director, had called the police on October fifteenth of the previous year and requested that officers go round to check out a burglary and get a list of purloined items from his housekeeper. He'd rung from the airport, being just about to depart on a business trip. He'd left, he said, as well as the list of items, a written description of the thieves, three of them, who he'd discovered the previous night in his sitting-room. Interrupted by him, he said, they'd fled through the front door.

The agency housekeeper that Mr Hamilton had hired when he'd bought the flat a year earlier hadn't been there when the robbery took place. When she'd arrived the following day, Mr Hamilton had explained to her what had happened. He'd supplied her with the list of stolen property and a sheet of paper giving an account of the affair and rough description of the robbers. A young girl with long dark hair and two fellows in their early twenties, one tall and dark, the other average height with fair hair. Jeans and jackets.

The housekeeper showed the officers a broken sitting-room window, which was at that point shielded by a latticed metal shutter. Hamilton's account stated he'd gone to bed that night and forgotten to pull the shutters and lock them. He'd also forgotten to set the burglar alarm.

I looked at Hamilton's neatly typed account and said, "Seems a bit odd to interrupt three burglars in your house at eleven at night, sit and type a full account, plus details of the theft, and only get around to calling the cops from the airport the next day."

Charlie had checked out the matter with the sergeant who'd gone to the scene. Apparently Hamilton had later called him from the USA asking what was being done about finding the "homeless people" who'd robbed him. That made him think – how could Hamilton know for sure the perpetrators were homeless? By his own account he'd only interrupted them at their work, whereupon they'd legged it.

The sergeant drew the obvious conclusion that he'd picked up the girl and while they were at it the others had come in through the window. Or she'd let them in and Hamilton had broken the window afterwards to make it look like a burglary, for insurance purposes. He thought, considering the fairly unimportant nature of the theft, that he might have decided not to claim, but there's no accounting for people's meanness.

Then, in November, came the call from on high. Charlie was rung by his superintendent, who asked him how he was getting on with finding the suspects in the Gordon Mews robbery. When he asked casually why this one was attracting special attention in this crime-ridden metropolis, his Super said, "Ask no questions. Just try to find the thieves." There were photofits of the three burglars now, he informed Charlie, because Mr Hamilton had come in and worked with the unit.

Charlie took the photofits and duly circulated them. Working on the assumption that Hamilton had correctly described the perpetrators of the crime as homeless, he sent blokes round the West End, figuring it had been an opportunistic crime committed by local pavement residents. Three names surfaced more regularly than any others, and those were Floyd, Carter and Whitcombe. But they were gone, or so it seemed. Charlie got them, along with the other look-alikes, checked on the computer. Most of the other names turned up, claiming DSS and the like. Floyd, Carter and Whitcombe did not.

"That's it, Sam," Charlie said, regretfully putting down his knife and fork and looking glumly at his scraped-clean plate. "A slightly funny burglary, three missing persons who might or might not have been responsible. Someone with influence eager to find them. And another unclosed file in the city of unfinished business."

"The stuff never turned up?"

He shook his head. "And now you're here," he stated.

"I can't tell you," I said. "I don't know, anyway."

He shook his head again. "Not a good idea," he told me, "not to know."

"Needs must, sometimes."

After Charlie and I parted I went down to the address in County Mayo, Floyd's home in earlier days.

The place was a fifty-acre farm lying on the edge of a little one-horse village. I put up at the local pub and spoke to the landlady there. She was reticent – she guessed I was up to something with my story of being an exhausted British businessman in search of rural calm.

What I found out was that she was in fact Floyd's aunt, the youngest of a big family, and that her older sister had had Dominic without letting on who his father was. In spite of the scandal her brother, who had inherited the farm about the time Dominic was born, had taken in his sister and the

baby until the young Dominic was about ten. At that point he got married. The farm wasn't big enough for both wife and sister, so Dominic's mother had taken the boy to Liverpool where, it seemed, she hadn't prospered. Dominic had written to them up until he was sixteen, at which point he'd left home. After that, they lost him.

I packed up at the pub and went to Liverpool. I tried the hostels, the shelters and the main DSS office, but there was no record of Floyd, Carter or Whitcombe. If they were leading the floating lives of the homeless this didn't mean they weren't in Liverpool, but they were no more likely to be there than anywhere else.

The pub landlady had given me the impression that Dominic had been a bright and likeable lad, so unless he'd blasted all the brain cells out of his skull with drink and drugs as he started growing up, he'd have heard that the police had been asking about the trio in London in November. That world has the usual complement of people prepared to shop a friend for fifty quid – the higher you go the more it costs, of course – but it also has its own kind of friendships and solidarity. If they'd thought the police were looking for them, whatever they'd done or not done – and in that world it's hard to survive without doing something – they'd have taken to their heels and not come back. They could be halfway round the EEC by now, and I didn't think it worthwhile to plod round Europe after them. Dominic Floyd, Joe Carter and Vanessa Whitcombe were moving lightly and quietly through life and it would have taken more time and money than I had at my disposal to find them.

I made an appointment to see Pugh. He didn't want me at the Home Office, so we met at the pub for a sandwich and a beer. I had the beer. Pugh drank orange juice. He was the careful sort.

I told him where we were Carter-Floyd-Whitcombe-wise, i.e. nowhere, and suggested I should submit my account.

"Well, if that's all you can do, I suppose you'd better," he told me.

We parted without cordiality. Underneath, I had begun to note, Pugh was uneasy, not just because of his lack of success in finding the three, but, I guessed, because he knew he had too little information about what he was doing and was therefore scared of it. It meant he couldn't calculate his possible exposure if things went wrong. He was right to be afraid, as it happened.

So far so good, William. That was five years ago. At that point I'd done my duty, broken no laws and I thought that was the end of it.

Ten

Fleur saw a tall man of about thirty, clean-shaven, in an apparently expensive suit, shirt and dark tie. With the stairs leading up to her flat just ahead of her she pulled up, calculating she'd do better to run back into the street, across to the pub if necessary, rather than upstairs, where he might corner her on the balcony. She couldn't be sure Dominic would answer his door if she banged on it in a panic and the other residents might be reluctant to open up after dark. The man who had accosted her, spruce and speaking in a calm educated tone, didn't look like a mugger, but she still felt nervous of this individual who had been hanging about in the shadows waiting for her. He might be an angry creditor of Verity's. So, poised to run and watching to see that the distance between them didn't narrow, she said, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"My name's Valentine Keith," he told her. "As a matter of fact I'm a kind of cousin, your father's uncle's son. Dickie's been looking for you. Dickie Jethro."

As she went from alarm to utter astonishment, Fleur's knees gave. She held on to the bottom of the iron railing beside the stairs and said, "What?"

When her mother and Robin Carew-Stockley had been married for six years, and she had been, as Grace informed her, officially adopted by her stepfather, Grace told her who her father was. She had vague memories of being told something about this before, when she'd been very small and still living in Yorkshire with her grandmother. Grace had told Fleur she'd been a dancer – she had been in the *corps de ballet* of the Royal Ballet, Fleur found out later – and had fallen in love with a man who in the end did not want to marry her. So, she'd told the young Fleur, she'd come to live with Grandma and had her baby – Fleur.

This story had seemed to Fleur at the time rather like a fairytale, though it left her feeling hollow and rather sad. She had barely understood what Grace was telling her and more or less forgotten about it. Grace and Robin had married. Later, they had moved to Kent. She had missed her grandmother and the old house, but adapted to the new life and from then on had taken it for granted that Grace was her mother and Robin her father.

One day they sat her down to fill in the gaps. There might have been a reason why they picked this particular moment, but if there was, she had forgotten what it was. That was when Grace told her about her dancing career, which Fleur already knew something about from the mounted photographs of a slim young woman in white tulle hanging on the wall of the landing upstairs. She told Fleur that at nineteen she had met Fleur's father and how, when she announced herself to be pregnant, he had insisted she have an abortion. When she'd refused, he'd become very angry and told her that if she went ahead and had the baby he would never see her again. A promise, Grace told her, that he'd kept.

"I'm sorry, Fleur," Robin had gently told her. "But remember. You are our daughter, Grace's and mine, and that's what counts."

Fleur had then asked the obvious question. "Who is he? What's his name?"

Grace had flinched, then answered, "His name was Richard Jethro. He was a banker."

Naïvely, Fleur had asked, "Is he dead?" and Grace had replied, "Not as far as I know." This answer, Fleur later realised, had not been a lie, but couldn't have been described as absolutely true.

At that moment she'd imagined her real father to be like Mr Thorne, the balding middle-aged manager of the local bank used by Grace and Robin. She tried to imagine Grace – young, slim, in her tutu in some graceful balletic position as in the photographs – falling in love with Mr Thorne, and felt confused. However, the conversation seemed to have ended. Robin said briskly, "Come on – you'll be late for your piano lesson," and she stood up, picked up her music case and followed him out of the room. Later she regretted this obedience, thinking she ought to have stood still and refused to go without more details, some answers to the questions that began to enter her mind even as she stumbled through her piece at the piano in Miss Middleton's cottage. But Grace and Robin, as if colluding, consciously or unconsciously, hadn't given her enough time and she understood then, as children do, that they did not want the subject referred to again.

Fleur went away to school and it was there, when she was fourteen, one dull Sunday afternoon in winter, that she had come across a picture of her father and his family in the magazine section of a Sunday newspaper. Photographed with a pretty, upper-class wife, Lady Pansy – daughter, the article said, of Lord Fox – on a sofa in a well-appointed drawing-room,

Richard Jethro was a stocky man with a shock of black hair, direct hazel eyes, a square face and a long firm mouth. Fleur, sitting in a chair by her window overlooking the playing fields, where enthusiasts were playing hockey in the biting wind, was startled to notice that although in most respects she did not at all resemble the man said to be her father, her large hazel eyes and clearly marked, arched eyebrows were exactly like Richard Jethro's.

On either side of the couple on the couch were two children, the boy about ten, the girl a little younger. Her father had his arm round the boy. Feeling quite weak and strange, she read the accompanying article.

Her father, the Chief Executive Officer of the investments department of a City of London merchant bank, had, she read, recently become a partner at another, that of Fox, Strauss and Smith. It would henceforth be known as Strauss Jethro Smith, although the Fox family tradition, which dated back to the early nineteenth century, would not be broken, as Jethro hoped that his son, Lord Fox's grandson, would take over from him eventually.

His children, Fleur noted, were called Robert and Hazel. She gazed at the two faces, both seeming a little bemused, and thought, Those are my half-brother and -sister. Once upon a time she'd appealed to Grace and Robin for a brother or sister. It looked now as if for the last ten years of her life, without knowing it, she'd had them. She read on – there'd been a divorce from an Italian actress, apparently, before he'd married his present wife.

Fleur gazed at the picture. There they were, her father and her brother and sister, all completely unknown to her, sitting there as if she didn't exist. Did he ever think about her, she wondered? Would it be all right to find out where he lived and go and see him?

When Jess, with whom she shared her room, came in, she told her in confidence and Jess, like best friends everywhere, went and told everybody else. Fleur had an uncomfortable few weeks with the others coming up to her and saying, "Guess what? I've just found out my father's Prince Charles" – or Arthur Scargill or Elvis. There was a scheme for building a marble pigsty for the school's two pigs in which her father would invest. Elaborate plans after the style of Pugin were drawn. Fleur pretended to take this well, but felt bad inside. Mercifully the holidays came along and next term the matter was forgotten. Fleur never told her parents she had seen the

article but thereafter kept an eye out for Jethro's name in the papers. There was a knighthood, another divorce, another marriage.

Jess, after the initial betrayal, very seldom mentioned Dickie Jethro again until Ben disappeared and Verity was collapsing. Then she said, "Your father – your real father – could get you out of this easily." Fleur had told her sourly, "Funny – before he left Ben started hinting about recapitalising the firm with Richard Jethro's help and advice. I said I'd never met the man in my life – he'd never even sent me a birthday card. I didn't want to see him, especially to ask for money, and anyway, I thought it was unlikely he'd help. Ben told me he understood, but I don't think he did – well, by that time he was more desperate than I knew."

"So that's that," Jess had said, discouraged.

Much of all this went very quickly through Fleur's head as she clung to the metal handrail. Her impulse was to flee. She said to Valentine Keith, "Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about. Excuse me – I've got to go." She started rapidly up the stairs towards her flat.

He bounded after her, saying breathlessly, "Fleur – Sir Richard wants to see you."

"He's too late," she told him, gaining the landing and moving quickly to her flat door. Her key was in the lock when, approaching fast, he said, "From the look of this place I'm surprised you're rejecting the attention of a very wealthy father."

Fleur, having opened her door, swung round. "Who sends a deputy to hang round the garages at night to find me?"

She went in and was closing the door when his foot came in between the door frame and the door. Through the crack he said, "Sir Richard's in Budapest. That's why he asked me to contact you."

"Well, you have. Now, take your foot out of the door and clear off."

"Fleur—"

"I'll call the police," she threatened.

Dominic came out of his door on the right at almost the same moment that Doug Simmons emerged on the left-hand side.

"What's happening?" Dominic said to Valentine Keith as Fleur opened her door.

"I've just been trying to talk to Fleur," Valentine said.

“It looks as if she doesn’t want to talk to you,” said Dominic. “You all right, Fleur?”

“Yes,” she said.

Dominic looked at Valentine, who said to Fleur, “I’m going.” He put his hand in his jacket – Dominic froze – then handed her his card.

“Ring me when you’ve had time to think,” he told her, then turned and walked back to the staircase.

Dominic and Doug Simmons hung over the railing watching him leave. From the doorway Fleur heard Dominic say dreamily to Doug, “Listen to that – lovely sound,” and Doug Simmons reply, “Beautiful engineering. Silver Seraph, isn’t it? That’d set you back a bit.”

“A hundred and fifty-five grand,” said Dominic.

“And that’s without the extras,” returned Doug.

“I’d give a lot to drive one of them, just once,” said Doug Simmons.

“I know what you mean,” agreed Dominic.

“Well, don’t mind me,” Fleur said indignantly, going in and shutting the door. He could have been a murderer – anything – she thought furiously, and her alleged defenders were now standing around lusting after his vehicle. She had little doubt her accoster had been who he said he was, a messenger from her father; but why, after all these years? Why, now she’d gone to ground in Adelaide House and was harder to find than she’d ever been, had he suddenly decided to seek her out? What did he want?

When Dominic banged on her door, calling, “Fleur—Fleur—are you all right?” she had half a mind not to let him in, but decided that was unfair. He and Doug had come out to see if anything was wrong, after all, and it was childish to sulk just because something more interesting and beautiful, the Rolls Royce, had come along.

He took her in his arms. “You’re upset. You’re shaking. Who was that?”

“An unwanted relation,” she told him.

“What you need is a nice sleep in bed,” he said persuasively and before long they were both in bed, and not sleeping. Dominic was a generous lover, but this time she felt something wild in his lovemaking and knew that he was exorcising some of the grief and horror he felt about Vanessa’s death.

Afterwards he muttered, “Thanks, love,” and she murmured back, “Never mind, Dom. Never mind.” Then she asked, “When you ran across

the road – the phone call – are you dealing drugs?”

“You a policeman?”

“No, but—”

“The bloke we’re working for in Islington won’t pay. And Joe and me are off the dole now. All we’ve got is this flat – and the council might not let us stay on. We’ve got to pay the rent. More important, how are you going to pay the mortgage?”

“I’ve asked my parents.”

“That’s the difference,” he said. “You’ve got parents. I’ll be knocking out a small quantity of dope until Joe and me get straight again. I wouldn’t deal in anything else.” He put his arm round her. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not,” she said.

He looked lazily at his watch and jumped out of bed. Startled, Fleur said, “What is it?”

“I’ve got to go and meet a man.”

“Oh – great,” she said.

“We’ve all got our secrets,” he said. “There’s this mysterious relation of yours.”

“What do you mean?”

He had dressed and was sitting on the bed putting on his shoes. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to,” he said, “and I don’t have to tell you. Isn’t that the best way?” And, kissing her fondly, he was gone.

Fleur heard the door bang and lay there knowing she ought to be reproaching herself for having anything to do with Dominic – again. He’d rushed in, fucked her and dashed off to do a drugs deal. Was that what she wanted out of life?

She thought dreamily of Ben. They’d had so many plans, things had been so good. They worked so hard, making deals, flashing about, going to parties, coming in late at night, Ben with a bottle of champagne under his arm, on top of the world, she thought. Then they’d plunged, plummeted down. Oh Ben, she thought, sadly, oh Ben ... She was asleep.

Next morning at eight the doorbell rang and there was Dominic outside, looking bright and eager to please, with a teapot and a pint of milk. Jason was beside him, wagging his tail. She let them both in. He poured out some tea and handed her a cup. “So what were you doing last night?” she asked him.

“You’re rotten in the mornings aren’t you? It’s right what they say. You have to live with people to find out about them.”

Unmoved, Fleur persisted, “So – what were you doing?”

“Seeing justice done. Ask no further questions.”

“Was it to do with Vanessa?”

“Will you be after knowing what I heard on the news today?” he said in an Irish accent. “Them hideous Iraqis, or is it the other ones, are after getting themselves an atomic bomb. Now what do you think will be the consequence of that?”

“So you’re the Masked Avenger of the Yarborough Estate, are you?”

“Ah, though, doesn’t it put it all in perspective, somehow? All the petty little things we worry about and there’s all these pagans with the power of life and death over us.”

“You’re a real shithead, Dominic,” said Fleur.

“No, all you’re thinking really is I’m not as stupid as I look. People like you like to think people like me are stupid. People like me go along with it somehow, to protect you. Or where would you all be?”

“In the middle of naked class war,” she said.

“I’m off down to the Yarborough to sort out the funeral with Joe and Ellen,” he told her, “for when the coroner’s done.”

As he was turning away from the front door a motorcycle courier in a helmet came along the walkway and handed Fleur a letter. Dominic stopped to watch her open it. Inside was a note on paper so thick it was almost cardboard, headed with an address in Eaton Square. “Dearest Fleur,” it read, “I’m so pleased Valentine Keith managed to get in touch with you. Can you dine with us on Thursday week at eight? Dickie will be back by then – just a few friends. Do say yes. Dickie is dying to meet you and get to know you better.” The letter was signed “Sophia Jethro”.

“Fuck,” said Fleur, dismayed.

“Bad news?” enquired Dominic sympathetically.

“Do you mind – oh, forget it,” she said, stuffing the letter in her dressing-gown pocket.

“All right – all right,” Dominic said pacifically.

The postman arrived and handed her another letter, which she opened while Dominic again looked on. The letter summoned her to a three-week

computer course, beginning after Christmas, which was good news, Fleur thought, but not good enough to pay the mortgage.

Dominic had spotted the familiar DSS heading. "The barmaid at the Findhorn left suddenly," he reported. "Both parents sick in Ireland. Why don't you ask Patrick for her job?"

"Thanks, I will," Fleur said. "I'll go now."

Dominic left and Fleur got ready quickly and dashed across the road to the Findhorn Star. The landlord was behind the bar, looking gloomy. He gave her the job. "Start this evening?" he asked.

"Right," she said.

"Horrible business up on the Yarborough last night," he mentioned.

"What happened?" she asked.

"A nasty beating-up," he told her.

"Tsk, tsk."

She returned to the flat where there was a message from her mother: "Fleur, darling I can't catch you. The answer's yes." She rang Jess. "I need some advice," she said.

"Is it that next-door neighbour of yours again? If so, don't tell me anything," Jess said crossly.

"No."

"All right, but you'll have to meet me in Peckham. There's a problem with *Martin Crux* and I've got to be there." Though she was mournful about her failures, Jess had actually also developed and packaged two successful series which had been sold to commercial TV: one a game show which practically ran itself, the other *Martin Crux*, a series of hour-long shows about a priest-detective.

Fleur made her way to a housing estate in Peckham where, on a large area of concrete surrounded by large tower blocks, the cast and cameras were assembled with many of the locals herded together behind metal barriers, looking on. The actors playing the estate's residents, Fleur noted, looked a lot glossier than the real thing. Martin Crux, played by a curly-haired actor in jeans, a black leather jacket and a dog collar, was running across the courtyard. The director stood behind a camera and Jess was leaning against the wall of one of the tower blocks, looking on and talking into a mobile phone. As Fleur approached Jess, the actor playing Martin

Crux, having done his dash across the concrete, was returning camerawards, discouraged, to do it again.

Fleur joined Jess against the wall as something thudded down the rubbish chute behind them. It started to drizzle.

The cameras stopped turning. The director and the cameraman were evidently discussing the rain. Jess bounded over. There was an argument. The director yielded and the actor took up his position and started running again. Jess came back to Fleur and said, "That lame bugger. He thinks he's Scorsese. And now he's being put off by a little bit of rain. We're three weeks behind already. I was two hours – two – on the phone to him last night. You're well out of this, I can tell you."

The actor was coming back. He bent over, holding his knee, protesting to the director.

Once again, the actor ran, not exactly limping but certainly favouring one leg. When he got to his mark he sat down on the wet concrete clutching his knee.

"Lunch!" Jess shouted. "Sam!" she called to one of the cameramen who was passing, the camera wrapped up against the rain, "Where's to eat round here?"

He told her and gave her directions. They went to Jess's car. "I don't know how he does it – wherever you go Sam knows the best place to eat. Plus he could direct this film better than bloody James."

"I watched two of this *Martin Crux* series," Fleur said.

"People love it. It's the high moral tone, all these dilemmas. Of course," she mused, "if they commission another series he'll have to get laid." In the restaurant was the actor who played Martin Crux with his boyfriend. A star-struck waitress stood by for their order.

"Hi, Charlie," Jess said.

"Don't let him cripple me," he appealed.

"Don't worry," she said grimly.

She and Fleur sat down and she asked, "What about the dossier?"

"Shut up," Fleur told her.

"I knew it," Jess said. "You've done it again – had sex with him. What are you doing? You're not the sort for rough trade."

"Look, Jess," Fleur said, "there's been a tragedy to start with. A death. And I'm not even going to talk about it. This is what happened." And she

told Jess about Valentine Keith's visit and the invitation to dinner from Sophia Jethro, who, she supposed, was her stepmother.

As she spoke Jess's expression became calculating. "You'll have to get your hair done," she said. "Have you still got that ecru lace dress you had for the awards?"

"You're saying 'go'?" Fleur questioned.

"Of course. What have you got to lose? You really ought to meet your own father. Play your cards right and you can get him to pay off Verity's creditors, and if he takes to you, you and I can go into business together if Debs sells up. I've got a nice little series, costume, sort of Eliza Doolittle thing—"

"Lord, Jess," Fleur said, upset and impressed at the same time. "I come to you for advice and emotional support and before I know it you're putting together a package."

"Bollocks to emotional advice and support, Fleur," Jess told her. "You knew when you came I wasn't Lambeth Social Services. Your father's taken the trouble to find you. If he wasn't rich and well known, would you be giving me all this? I don't think so. I think if he was a poor man with a bad leg living in a council flat you'd be round there cooking his dinner in a flash. You're hesitating because Dickie Jethro's wealthy and your parents have brought you up to think there's something wrong with large sums of money. Here's a chance to improve your life. It's an opportunity, not a moral dilemma. Some people," she concluded grimly, "would be glad." She dug into her food.

"The Me Generation speaks," Fleur said. "It hasn't crossed your mind that this man dumped my mother, pregnant at nineteen, when she wouldn't abort me. Now he's back, hooray, I'm supposed to welcome him with open arms."

"Fleur!" Jess exclaimed. "It may be remorse. Maybe he wants to do the right thing. You could give it a chance. There's nothing wrong with money, you know. Look at you, in that council flat, getting closer to bankruptcy every minute. Think of your creditors. Let him pay them," she said cunningly, "and Ben might come back."

Fleur thought of Ben and the restoration of their old life together. "How can I take it on those terms?" she asked.

"Tell me when you've heard the offer."

“What about what he did to my mother?”

“You’ve only heard one side of the story,” Jess said. “Eat up.”

“You’re saying my mother didn’t tell me the truth,” Fleur protested.

“How do I know?” Jess asked. “Do you? Even the best people don’t always tell the full story about things like that. Half the time they don’t know it themselves.”

Fleur, fork poised, brooded. Jess had taken her bike when they were twelve, wrecked it and denied everything – Jess had stolen her mascara on the night of a film premiere – Jess had, for God’s sake, slept with Ben. She stood up. “Thanks. You’ve been a big help.”

“Sit down,” Jess commanded. “Fleur – if you had more respect for money you wouldn’t be where you are today, living where you’re living, facing the problems you’re facing, having it off with someone half an hour away from a prison sentence. It’s those superannuated hippies who brought you up. This is your father we’re talking about. How many fathers have you got to throw away?”

But Jess had gone too far. Fleur walked out. She got a bus back to Cray Hill, cleaned her flat furiously and went to the Findhorn Star to start her shift. It was a busy night and she had to learn the job fast so she had no chance to think about the day’s events.

She got home tired to find yet another long, silent message on the answering machine, and a further message from her mother and the last from Jess, saying, “Fleur – I’m very, very sorry. I’ll ring tomorrow.”

She did, at eight thirty a.m. from the church where she was to start filming. “I’m putting a corpse on the altar,” she said. “Listen – I’m really sorry. I said too much yesterday, but I’ve set you up an appointment with Gervase in Mount Street. I’m putting the bill on Camera Shake’s account.”

“Forget it,” Fleur said ungraciously.

“Look, Fleur – I haven’t got long. Don’t turn your dad down flat. At least give it a go – please.”

“I’m just worried about what my mother and father will think. They may see it as a betrayal, like a rejection.”

“They may, if you tell them. But think about yourself for a change.”

She wasn’t saying anything Fleur hadn’t thought herself. “I’ll go,” she told Jess.

“About your hair—”

“No,” said Fleur. “It’s warts and all.”

“Have it your way,” Jess said. “I’ve got to go.”

Fleur got her dress from an unpacked box and took it to the dry cleaner. She found the shoes which went with the dress. She was committed.

Eleven

For a week Fleur existed quietly next to the quiet Simmons family and the mostly quiet flat in which Dominic and Joe lived. Neither of them was there very much.

Dominic came into the pub late one evening and waited for her to leave. As they walked back he told her that he and Joe had gone with Ellen to Vanessa's inquest that day. The cause of death had been a sudden embolism no doctor could have predicted and which couldn't even, with any certainty, be connected with the drug overdose. "The funeral's Saturday," he told her. "Ellen says she'd like you to come, if you want."

"OK," Fleur said. "How is she?"

"She's got Vanessa's dad on her hands. He's been gone for years, but he's collapsed, so Ellen's got to look after him. She doesn't seem to mind, says it takes her mind off things."

"Look, Dominic," she said awkwardly, as they went up the steps, "don't come round tonight." This was not what she really wanted, but she felt it wasn't good enough for Dominic to sleep with her, disappear, come back and sleep with her again just when he felt like it.

"If that's what you want," he said.

"It's not what I want, but—"

"I can see there's not a lot in it for you."

"I don't want anything," she protested.

He said, "I can't handle this. If you don't want to, you don't want to. That's it."

They mounted the steps in silence, and parted. Fleur didn't know if she was glad or sorry to have done what she had.

Next day she got her dress back from the dry cleaner and that evening started getting ready. Jess had been right about her hair, long now and more or less all right with her normal clothes, but scruffy looking with the formal dress. When she answered the door she found Dominic outside with a bunch of roses and a silly grin on his face, which was wiped off when he took in her appearance.

He pushed the flowers at her and turned to go.

“Thanks – come in,” she said.

“Not if you’re going out,” he responded.

“Come in,” she said. “Look. It’s a family dinner – and look at my hair.”

“I see what you mean.”

He retreated to his open doorway and called, “Joe! Hey, Joe! Got a minute?”

Joe appeared and said, “What?”

“It’s her hair,” Dominic said. “Got to go out – looks like a scruff.”

“Yes,” said Joe, appraisingly. Pale and stringy in his jeans, his blonde hair cropped short and close to his head, he looked more like the defendant in a case involving a stolen car than a fashion adviser.

“I can cut your hair,” he volunteered. “Ten minutes – just a tidy-up.”

“Oh, God,” Fleur said nervously.

“That’s what they all say,” he remarked. “But later, they thank me.”

“Go on,” advised Dominic, “give him a go. He’s good – he knows what to do.”

“Why not?” Fleur said recklessly. She’d told Jess she wasn’t going to make a special effort to impress so, she thought, why not get her hair cut by the man next door?

“Better take the dress off,” Joe advised.

Within minutes she was sitting, hair damped down, on a kitchen chair while Joe, frowning with concentration, trimmed and shaped her hair with the kitchen scissors. “I won’t do too much,” he said. “These scissors are crap.” But Fleur could see he was making an improvement.

“Have you done much of this?” she asked.

“A bit,” he said. “I started off in the children’s home. The girls used to be desperate to look OK, and the boys couldn’t stand the short back and sides, so I’d do it for cigarettes.”

“His clientele grew and grew,” Dominic added. “It’s a bit like being a doctor, or a nurse. People always need you. You’d be surprised – if you live on the streets, you really mind about looking grotty.”

“I used to do Van’s, when she’d let me,” Joe said. “She’d come up a treat. Do you reckon it’s true your hair grows after you’re dead?”

No one answered. The funeral was on the following day.

Fleur stood up, got dressed, and Joe did her eyes for her.

“Recommend me to the rich and famous,” he said. “I do house calls.”

“He does,” Dominic confirmed, “but usually in the middle of the night when they’re all asleep.”

“That was only the once,” Joe protested.

Nevertheless, there was an awkwardness. Dominic had evidently decided to court her with flowers only to find her dressing for a smart party, ready, he would think, to mix with smart people and find a rich boyfriend. As she hastily threw things into her evening bag, she told him, “It’s rich relations I’ve never met. I’m going to Eaton Square. You remember that man in the Rolls-Royce—”

“Bring us back a doggy bag,” Joe said.

Fleur picked up her coat. “Thanks, Joe,” she said. She boldly kissed Dominic on the cheek.

She felt overdressed on the tube to Victoria and underdressed when she entered the house in Eaton Square, a mansion in an imposing terrace, where all the houses shone with paint and were decorated outside with elaborate window boxes. She walked up shallow white marble steps and rang the doorbell beside a glossy black front door. A small man in a black jacket opened the door. She said her name and went in, into a vast hall from which an imposing stairway rose.

She surrendered her coat to the manservant and waited. The hall smelt faintly of sweet herbs and, she estimated, would have contained most of her flat.

“Will you come this way, Miss Stockley?” said the servant and nervously she followed him. Now she was here she knew she would meet her natural father for the first time. She didn’t know what she felt. Confusion and helplessness seemed to dominate and under that she found another feeling – resentment. He hadn’t cared, for twenty-eight years, who she was. Well, she thought, she was here now and she’d better suppress her indignation. But it wouldn’t go away completely.

She was ushered into a small drawing-room with pale walls and gilded mouldings. The furniture was white, there were paintings on the walls and two vast arrangements of flowers stood on pedestals on either side of long windows. There were no signs of human activity taking place or ever having taken place there, and she couldn’t help reflecting that it reminded her of a public room in a very expensive hotel.

Five people were present, three men and two women. One of the men was Valentine Keith, who moved towards her and said, "Fleur – welcome. Come and meet your father."

Fleur had instantly guessed that the man standing before a vast, ornate white marble fireplace was Dickie Jethro. He was a thick-set man of average height, with short greying hair. He stood, dinner-jacketed and straight-backed, every inch the proprietor and man in charge. His face was square, nose a blunt triangle, mouth a colourless straight firm line. Arched brown eyebrows lay below a wide brow crossed by two deep lines. And below the eyebrows were the wide, hazel eyes, so like Fleur's own.

She knew from the press he'd come from a lower middle-class family in Gravesend, but now bore no trace of his ordinary start in life. He might have been a peer, a senior politician – anything. What he was not was a man who took orders from anyone.

As Fleur moved towards him, he smiled warmly and his face lit up. He advanced, took each of her hands in his and kissed her on the cheek. His hands were quite large, muscular and reassuring. He exuded the faint, dry smell of some expensive lotion – an aftershave, perhaps. He pulled back and put his hands on her shoulders, studying her face, then said, "It's been a long wait, but well worth while. Look, Sophia: my eyes, my eyebrows ..."

The woman in a rose-coloured, bead-encrusted dress who moved to stand beside him was only two or three years older than Fleur. She had an oval, ivory face, much glossy black hair piled on her head in elaborate coils and round her neck a string of very large pearls, like marbles. She wore matching earrings in an old gold setting. In spite of the modernity of her dress she had the air of a woman in a painting of Charles IPs time: lush, bedecked with jewellery, shrewd and intelligent. Fleur got the instant impression that, in spite of the age difference and her father's several divorces, Dickie Jethro and his wife were a well-matched couple.

"My wife, Sophia," he said. She put her hand out formally and, as if meeting the Queen, Fleur lightly shook it. "I'm so glad you came," Sophia said with apparent sincerity. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last." She added, "Now, you know Valentine. And here are my mother and father, George and Zoe Andriades."

George, a broad man with a black moustache, smiled, as did his wife, a dark, heavily made-up woman, good looking and beautifully dressed in a slim red chiffon dress and jacket. Fleur went over to where she sat. She put

out her hand and Fleur bent over to shake it. Zoe held her hand for too long, while gazing searchingly into Fleur's eyes. Fleur, bent over and conscious of her own rough paw in Zoe's soft and manicured hand, endured the examination without pleasure.

"So, Fleur, how's your life?" her father enquired cheerfully.

An impossible question from a total stranger, thought Fleur. It didn't seem worth going into details, since if he'd taken the trouble to track her down she assumed he'd probably run a check on her. She said, "I was in the film business, but it's very volatile. So now I have a little flat and a little job." She realised, in spite of her resentment, that she liked his energy, his apparent openness, his air of generosity.

"What sort of films?" asked her father.

"Documentaries," she told him, suppressing memories of the hour-long unflattering portrait of City traders after a big stock market crash. "There was one on city statuary," she mentioned. Her idea, thank goodness. "One on drugs," she added weakly. "The twenty most commonly prescribed, where they come from and the benefits and dangers involved."

"I saw that," Zoe said promptly. "I rang my doctor next day in a panic. I think your approach might have been a little alarmist."

"Film is a very powerful medium," George Andriades remarked, soothingly.

Fleur was grateful for his tact. Two more guests – Henry and Fiona Jones – were announced. Henry was tall, balding, a mild-looking man who wore spectacles; his wife, like a female counterpart, was slightly stooped, with piled-up straying grey-blond hair and a rather baggy brown knitted skirt with a matching top. It was like the entry of two starlings into a cage of exotic birds.

Jethro introduced Henry and Fiona Jones. "My right-hand man and his wife, Fiona. Henry, you're so late I'm going to punish you by not offering you a drink. We'll go straight in."

Valentine Keith was at Fleur's side as they crossed a corridor into the dining-room, where a circular table was laid for dinner with three small silver filigree bowls full of tiny snowdrops and pansies in the centre. The walls were covered with what looked like very old pale green wallpaper, decorated with curling darker green and gold flowers. Two jardinières beside the drawn curtains covering French windows were full of plants.

“There are placements,” Sophia said, “because it’s easier, really.” Fleur found herself on one side of the table opposite Valentine Keith, with the solid bulk of George Andriades on one side and the unassuming Fiona Jones on the other. Richard Jethro sat with his back to the windows, his wife opposite him. Wine was poured into the first of the three glasses set in front of each guest.

Dickie Jethro stood up, knocked on an empty glass with his knife to command attention, then said, “I know you’re all aware that tonight we welcome Fleur to the house. Not just my daughter, but my long-lost daughter who is very beautiful, too. I’m sure you all agree having met her that I’ve been too slow to find her. So – I propose a toast – to Fleur.” At which the others raised their glasses and repeated, “Fleur.”

Although this event took only seconds, those seconds seemed long ones to Fleur, as the smile on her face became rigid and seemed to set itself in concrete. As she said, “Thank you,” to her father and smiled her frozen smile at the others, a maid began to serve the hors-d’oeuvres.

Zoe Andriades, who was sitting opposite Fleur next to Valentine Keith, said to her, “How charming of Dickie to do that. I’m so pleased you didn’t jump to your feet and reply, like a Russian.” This left Fleur wondering if she should not have jumped to her feet and made a short but graceful speech of thanks, though she thought on the whole she shouldn’t have. The fact was that she was in a world where she didn’t understand the rules. She wondered what on earth she was doing here, being fêted by a father she’d never met. What would Grace, or Robin – the man who’d helped her with her homework and mended her bicycle punctures – think if they knew? What was she going to tell them?

Valentine Keith broke into her thoughts, “Tell me what you’d do if you were back in films,” he said.

Fleur’s mind was empty. She said, “A series about men who had to bring up babies on their own. It would be very successful.”

“No social conscience?” he asked.

“It didn’t work too well for me,” she said lightly. “What do you do?”

“My dear,” he said, “I am a legislator and representative of the people.”

“Do you mean an MP?” Fleur asked in embarrassment. “I’m sorry. I ought to have known.”

“I’m just a humble toiler in the vineyards of Westminster,” he told her. “It’s been proved only ten per cent of people know the names of more than twenty Members of Parliament. Half the population don’t know the name of their own member.”

“Admit it, Val,” said Dickie from his end of the table, “politics doesn’t make any difference to anyone’s life.”

“Unless you worry about who makes your laws and spends your taxes,” Valentine said.

“No, I’m talking about where it counts. Where you live, who you love, where you work, and who with. Be honest. That’s ninety-nine per cent of people’s lives, isn’t it?”

Valentine looked uncomfortable and was about to reply when Jethro went on, “We buy and sell them, don’t we, George?”

George had been talking to Zoe. He looked down the table enquiringly. “Politicians,” explained Dickie. “Bought and sold – just get the price right and you’re on.”

“Definitely,” George Andriades affirmed, smiling.

“Ten a penny,” added Dickie. He said to Valentine, who was hiding his annoyance badly, “Only joking, Val. Sophia tells me I go too far sometimes. Husbands do. Aren’t I right, Henry?”

Henry Jones, a man who did not look as if he ordinarily went too far, nodded agreeably. “Absolutely,” he confirmed.

“It’s the privilege you get for paying all the couturier’s bills. If only I’d been born a woman.”

“You would be less amused if you had been,” Zoe Andriades said to her son-in-law. “Now tell me, Dickie, is it true you want to sell the house in Jamaica? Please don’t do it. It’s so lovely. The view – it’s unique. There’s nothing like it in the Caribbean. What more could anyone want than that view over the ocean at sunset?”

“It’s too small. Four bedrooms isn’t enough,” Dickie said, “and I don’t like the neighbours.”

“You could build on it to make more space,” Zoe insisted. “And as for the neighbours, they’re miles away. You’ll regret it if you sell it.”

“Too late,” Dickie said. “I already have. I’m planning to buy a house on Mustique.” He named the owner, a film star.

“You’re mad. It’s terribly depressing. The last owner committed suicide.”

“Mustique has fewer problems than Jamaica,” Dickie said. “However, in the meanwhile I’m afraid we’ll have to come to you at Braganza House.”

“Of course,” she said.

“You see,” he went on, “people like me are rootless, not like you two. You’ll always know, really, where you come from. I’m always looking for the ideal, getting bored and restless and moving on. A trial, isn’t it, Sophia?” His wife smiled. “And you – did you inherit my restlessness, Fleur, always looking round the next corner?”

Fleur shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’d have been a miserable nomad.”

Fleur’s father then, without any apparent embarrassment, went into a monologue concerning his career. “As you all know I started with nothing, and nobody behind me. When I joined the Midland Bank as a management trainee my mother thought her wildest dreams had come true. Her family thought she’d married beneath her. Her father and his brother – Val’s father – owned a chain of retail grocery shops. That’s why Val went to a public school and I went to the local comprehensive. I worked like a dog, eighteen hours a day, to get my accountancy exams and banking qualifications while holding down a job. I was manager at twenty-five, youngest bank manager in Britain. Which was when I decided to switch to investment banking and joined Devere Hatton – at the bottom, as usual. And a couple of years later there I was brokering an eighty-million-dollar deal between a US company and the government of Nicaragua – that’d be a billion in today’s terms. I was just thirty, Val, and you were in short trousers. At the last moment the South Americans decided to back out and I had to find another million in five days to keep the US guys in place. I didn’t sleep for three nights. In the end I got another million from Switzerland and readjusted the percentages with the Nicaraguans to keep everybody sweet. The night the deal was concluded I got up to go home. They found me next morning, asleep on the floor of the lift.” He addressed Valentine directly. “So don’t talk to me about the pleasures of choice. A man makes his choices, makes his luck and that’s all there is to it.”

This speech silenced the table. Valentine looked at his plate and then looked up. “I’d never quarrel with that,” he agreed.

Fleur worked out it must have been just as her father was beginning his career in merchant banking that Grace had told him about her unwanted pregnancy. To be fair to him, he'd probably never asked to be a father but, to be fair to herself, she couldn't be expected to have a lot of sympathy for the man who'd tried to have her aborted and then fled to become a big City banker.

"You're an example to us all, darling," Sophia said, then got to her feet, ready to lead the ladies from the table. "Tell each other some jokes," she instructed, "but do not leave us too long."

She, Zoe, Fiona Jones and Fleur went back to the drawing-room, which had been tidied in their absence. There was coffee on a table.

Fleur asked where the lavatory was and was led by the maid across the vast hall to a princely bathroom about the size of her bedroom. There were swagged curtains at the window, a thick carpet, a lavatory, a basin, and a dressing-table on which stood tortoiseshell brushes and combs, cotton wool, tissues, a bottle of French lavender water and a cut-glass bowl full of face powder.

She felt as stunned as if she'd gone abroad on holiday to a remote, strange spot. Great wealth seemed as strange to her as a foreign country.

Slowly she combed her hair and reapplied her make-up, trying out the powder in the bowl. She wondered how soon it would be possible to leave. Perhaps it was like Hollywood where everyone had to get up early to start filming, only in this case it would be to catch the Asian markets. Meanwhile, the questions she had asked herself on the journey to Eaton Square remained unanswered. Why had she been invited in the first place? What about her half-brother and half-sister?

On her return she found Sophia and Zoe seated on either side of the fireplace and Fiona Jones on a sofa by the wall. Fleur sat down opposite the fire between her stepmother and Zoe, who peered across at her and said, in no very pleasant way, "So – what do you make of us?"

"As Chairman Mao said about the French Revolution, 'too soon to say'," Fleur said, smartly.

"Hah!" said Zoe, her eyes snapping.

"Dickie has got me tickets for La Scala two weeks from now," Sophia told her mother. "Why don't you stay a little longer and come with us?"

“I’d love to, but George has business in Washington next week and I don’t know how long we’ll be there,” Zoe said. “I must go with him. As he gets older, he gets busier and only I stand between George and the eighteen-hour days he loves so much.” She turned to Fleur. “Have you any marriage plans, Fleur?”

“Not at the moment,” Fleur replied.

“Is there anyone special?”

She shook her head, “I’m afraid not.”

“I’m sure that won’t go on forever,” Fiona Jones reassured her kindly.

Fortunately the men arrived at this point. Fleur’s father, Henry Jones and George Andriades stopped to discuss something, while Val Keith plonked himself down on the floor beside her chair, holding his brandy. Looking up at her he said, “You know, I think you’ve got Dickie’s ears. A more feminine version, obviously. Far more charming. It’s the lobes. What do you think, Sophia?”

Sophia gazed at him calmly. “I really don’t know,” she said.

“You must know what your husband’s ears look like,” Zoe said. “Val, do get off the floor and sit in a chair.”

“Only if Fleur comes with me,” he said and stood, tugging her up and leading her to a small sofa beneath the window. There he sat close and, taking her hand, said in a low voice, “Have they been grilling you?”

Fleur, easing her hand from his grip, said, “A bit.”

“I urged the gents out so I could come and rescue you from the tortures of the harem,” he claimed.

“Thanks,” said Fleur.

From across the room Sophia said clearly to him, “I’m so sorry Diana couldn’t come. Give her my love, won’t you, Val?”

“I will,” he said.

“She’s still at Chorton?” Sophia asked.

“For the foreseeable,” he said. “Violet’s been sent home from the girls’ Borstal with measles.”

“Such a pretty house,” Zoe chipped in. “With a little river at the foot of the garden. Small, but perfect.”

“You must visit us again,” Valentine said.

“You must come to *us*” she said. “It’s been far too long. Barbados.”

Meanwhile, by the door, the other men had continued to talk and a message had been brought in for Jethro by the manservant.

“Fleur, come and sit here,” commanded Sophia. She patted a large square stool next to her. Fleur went over. As she sat down Sophia said, “I thought I’d better get you away from Val before his hands began to stray.”

Fleur laughed.

Jethro was bending over Fiona’s chair. “Fiona – darling – I’m afraid I’ll have to keep Henry here until late. Will you forgive me? And take my car home if you want to leave earlier.”

“Business, always business,” Zoe said to Fiona. “I wish I could employ a gentleman to take me about and entertain me, only George would object. Someone who looked like you, Val,” she said to Valentine, who had got up and come over, following Fleur, “would be absolutely perfect. Youngish, suave, well dressed and so smooth. Would you like a ‘walker’, Fiona?” she enquired.

“My dear, I’m generally too tired,” Fiona told her. “In fact, if you don’t mind I’ll accept your kind offer of a car straight away.” To Zoe she said, “My daughter’s just had a baby.”

Sophia stood up and went to the drawing-room door, opening it and apparently giving orders for the car to someone standing outside.

When she returned Fleur decided to move. She said, “I must go, too, I’m afraid. I have a job interview tomorrow.”

“What a pity,” Sophia said.

Val said, “I must also go. Even in opposition there are things to read.”

“You’re so conscientious, Val,” Sophia said drily.

She took Fleur’s hand. “Let us see you very soon,” she said. “Mother will invite you to Barbados. I do hope you’ll come.”

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” Fleur responded.

George Andriades came up. “Leaving so soon? What a pity. It’s been a pleasure to meet you,” he added, looking almost as if he meant it.

“I hope we’ll meet again,” Zoe said. “You must come to Barbados with us.”

In the hall Fleur’s father embraced her. “Well,” he said, “it’s been very nice – very nice. Now, promise you won’t disappear again. We mustn’t let another gap develop.”

Fleur, who had not been responsible for the last gap, which had lasted since her birth, politely agreed.

All in all it had been a disturbing evening, coming face to face with her father, her life's greatest enigma, and finding the reality of it so strange in some ways and so ordinary in others. And she'd liked him. It was scary, though, to think half her genes were the same as Dickie Jethro's. But only, she supposed, if you thought your DNA made a lot of difference.

It happened, it's over, that's it, she thought. She liked her father, and Sophia, too, from what she'd seen of them. But it was a different world. She wouldn't see any of them again.

Twelve

The morning after the dinner party at her father's Fleur decided to send a hostile thank-you note to her stepmother with the idea of putting the family off her for good. This letter began, chillingly: "Dear Lady Jethro," and went on, "Thank you for the dinner party which was very interesting. Would you tell your mother I will be unable to come on a visit to Barbados as I prefer to spend my holidays with my family." She almost put "my real family", but thought that might be going too far. She signed the letter with her full name, Fleur Carew-Stockley, and decided that she wouldn't get invited back after her little missive hit the mat. Less a bread-and-butter letter, more a poison-pen letter, she thought. It looked as if she'd chosen the computer course over the sun-drenched holiday, like some virtuous Victorian seamstress turning down a wicked lord bent on ruining her and buying her expensive clothes and jewels.

Fleur didn't mind what she did because that afternoon Vanessa was being buried. She, who had never been to anyone's funeral before, was going to have to watch someone younger than herself interred.

At lunchtime she went next door to ask Dominic what the arrangements were. He wasn't in but as she turned away she saw him and Joe coming to the top of the steps each carrying a large toolbox.

It was Joe who told her, "We'll leave at two. OK? Dom and me are just going in to get changed."

Fleur went back inside and put on a dark skirt and sweater. She rang the doorbell at two and she, Joe and Dominic, who were both in black suits, walked to the Yarborough. They entered the estate and walked across the stretch of grass between the groups of tower blocks. Seven floors up they entered the hall of Ellen Whitcombe's flat, which was painted in pale colours and had Japanese prints on the walls. There were two men in the living-room in dark suits, one small and wizened, uncomfortable in what looked like brand-new clothes, his face collapsed like a wrinkling balloon, the other bulky and assured. It was he, Ellen's boss, who introduced the smaller man as Tom Whitcombe, Vanessa's father.

Fleur sat down. Joe asked if anyone wanted a cup of tea. Dominic went into the kitchen, which led from the sitting-room, and put his arms round Ellen, who was in there with another woman in a black dress preparing food.

In the living-room no one said anything. Two girls in short black skirts, white blouses and jackets came in, then a young man. One of the girls said to Joe, "This is Melanie. Tell him, Mel."

"Jack told my brother to tell you Brendan's out of hospital."

"What a pity," Joe said, unmoved. "Had to happen sooner or later, I suppose."

"Only his dad's told the police you did it," she told him.

"Why would he think a thing like that?" Joe said mildly.

"What's all this about?" asked Tom Whitcombe.

"Some local toe-rag had a bit of an accident," Joe reported.

"I didn't want to drag it up at a time like this," Melanie said, "only Jack told my brother you'd want to know."

"It's always nice to know what's going on," Joe told her. "Are you sure you couldn't handle a drink, Tom?"

"Well, maybe just a small one," Tom conceded.

The young man said, "Anybody mind if I turn on the TV?" and did so.

Melanie, a minute figure with long blonde hair spreading over the shoulders of her jacket, said loudly, "Mark!" She went over and switched it off.

"Sorry," he muttered.

A middle-aged black woman in a black hat with a short veil came in with a bunch of flowers and a basket. She went to Tom Whitcombe and said, "She was a lovely girl, your daughter. We're all so upset about what happened. Such a big, happy smile when she was a kid." Then she went into the kitchen and kissed Ellen. She began to unpack the basket, bringing out foil-wrapped packs.

"It's funny how it all turns out," Tom Whitcombe said in a flat, despairing voice, not looking up from the carpet.

"It's a mystery," said Ellen's boss.

The young woman with Melanie began to cry. "Don't cry, Julie. Van's at peace now," Melanie counselled.

“I’ll just see if there’s anything I can do,” Fleur said and went to the kitchen, chiefly because she couldn’t bear sitting there with the others any longer. The small kitchen was crowded. Ellen’s friends were putting things on plates while Ellen furiously spread clingfilm over plates of chicken drumsticks and ham and bowls of salad. Then she started wiping down the surfaces with a cloth. Moments later she put this down and began fumblingly to tie a knot in a black rubbish bag.

Dominic took it from her and secured the bag. “I’ll take it to the chute,” he said and went out.

Fleur picked up the abandoned cloth and finished wiping the counter. “Anything I can do?” she asked.

“You could polish the glasses,” Ellen Whitcombe said in a calm voice. “They’re in that cupboard up there.” Her actions belied the voice. She began to turn round helplessly looking for something.

One of the women opened a drawer and handed Fleur a tea towel. “Use this,” she advised Fleur. “It’s OK, Ellen. I found it. Shall we carry some of this in and put it on the sideboard? The fridge is too full.” She and Ellen left the room with covered plates.

The other woman turned to Fleur. “There’s far too much,” she said. “She’s been racing round like a maniac. She was up cleaning at two in the morning.”

A buzz of lifeless talk came from the sitting-room. The toilet flushed. The doorbell rang, letting in more people.

Dominic returned and put on the kettle. “Some of them want tea,” he said levelly. “How was the posh party?”

“Awful,” Fleur replied. “The soap and the towels in the bathroom would pay your rent for a week. The bathroom’s as big as your flat.”

“So for the time being you won’t be swapping your present lifestyle.”

“What lifestyle?” Fleur asked. “I haven’t got one.”

“I suppose we can’t all afford one,” he commiserated.

“How’s that house you’re doing up?” she asked him.

“It’s over. The man refused to pay; Joe and me have come out of it as bad as we went in. But another of the guys, an electrician we bumped into over there, also asking for his money, put us on to a big job in the City. Now we’re building a big new bank. I’m sure we need another one of those.”

Ellen came back with the other woman, then Joe entered, looking angry. “Bloody Brendan’s cousin Chas is here,” he told Dominic in a low voice. “Says he’s come to pay his respects.”

The both turned towards the wall of the small kitchen to be less easily heard.

“Shall I tell him to go?” Joe asked.

“There’ll only be a row. Let him stay and make his little demonstration.”

“I’ll go and tell him he can’t come back – after,” Joe told him. He left the room.

“Who can’t come back?” Ellen asked.

“Just somebody I don’t think has any place here,” Dominic said.

“Surely that’s for me to say,” Ellen said. “I want all Van’s friends, people who knew her – oh, that reminds me, Dominic, will you go to Tesco’s for some kitchen roll? We’re right out.”

“It’s too late, Ellen,” he said gently. “The cars will be here soon.”

“But we’re right out—”

Dominic moved towards her and put his arms round her. “We’ll get some later,” he told her. She slumped against him. “It doesn’t matter,” he said.

“I know it doesn’t,” she said in a low voice. “Oh Dominic, this is so awful.”

“I know. Just get through it. We’re all here to help you.”

The doorbell rang. “The cars are here,” said someone outside the kitchen door. Dominic took Ellen’s arm and walked her to the front door.

There weren’t enough cars for everyone so Joe and Fleur volunteered to take the bus and found themselves at the bus stop with Chas, a handsome young man in a good dark coat. Joe ignored him.

“Looks like rain. Pity my motor’s in the dock,” Chas remarked imperturbably.

“Pity you’re not,” Joe said.

“Come on, Joe. Sad occasion and all that. We all loved Van. I knew her from knee high.”

Joe said nothing.

“This wasn’t down to me,” Chas said.

“Chas,” Joe told him, “shut up. You shouldn’t be here and everybody knows it, but you are, and none of us wants any trouble for Ellen’s sake,

which is lucky for you. You're making your point. So shut up."

Chas said no more and they stood in silence until the bus came up. At the cemetery gates, Chas said, "Better get a move on; they don't hang about in these places." He left them at a rapid pace.

It was cold. It began to rain and the bare trees stood stark in the vast graveyard like sentries. The priest at the head of the grave said the words of the burial service. Women sobbed. Tom Whitcombe, too, stood at the grave's edge weeping, while Ellen was tearless and rigid between Dominic and her boss. As the coffin was lowered into the ground, she moaned. Dominic said something to her.

Fleur and Joe, without discussing it, had stopped beneath a tree ten metres from the grave and the other mourners. Fleur felt him beside her, tense and breathing hard.

"You going back to Ellen's after?" he said to her.

"No. I'm not a friend or anything."

"Come out for a drink later?" he offered.

She accepted, said goodbye to Ellen, shook hands with Tom Whitcombe and went back to Adelaide House.

Numb and upset, she drifted to her phone and checked her answering machine mechanically. Jess had rung, probably to find out what had happened at the Jethros' the previous night. The silent caller had made another silent call. She sat down and looked into space, then, without planning it, opened one of the boxes in her bedroom. She took out a rug, a lamp and a small watercolour of a cow in a field that she'd bought on holiday with Ben in the West Country one snowy day, when the flakes of white had been swirling over the small cobbled street leading down to the sea. She found this memory did not upset her now. She put up the pictures and arranged the rug and lamp in her front room. Then the phone rang and, thinking it must be Jess again, keen for details of life among the great and good – and rich – she picked it up.

"Did you get the flowers?" Valentine Keith enquired. Fleur, thinking of Vanessa's flowers and wreaths making a splash of colour on the ground in the overcast cemetery amid the crowd of black-coated mourners, said, "What flowers?"

Then the doorbell rang and she went to the door and opened it. A man stood there holding a pretty countrified arrangement of flowers, leaves and

berries. “Thanks, Val,” she said into the phone, taking them, “they’re here.” She decided, unfairly, not to tip the delivery man. She didn’t want Val’s floral tributes – and she was too broke, anyway.

“Flowers all right?” he enquired.

“Lovely,” she replied meekly, hating herself because she sensed there was probably a sting in the tail – as there always would be where Val Keith was involved.

He went on, “Listen – I’ve got a couple of theatre tickets for tonight.”

“Sorry, Val. I’m going out with friends,” she told him.

“Oh,” he said. “Disappointment. I feel a little tear come creeping – never mind. A bit unrealistic to think you might be free at such short notice. Say I could change them for a night next week?”

“No, Valentine,” she said. “No hard feelings, but I wasn’t keen on my father. Which means I don’t want to get too close to anybody close to him.”

He took this calmly, responding straight away, “I can see the whole thing must have come as a bit of a shock. Would you mind if I rang in a week or two, just to talk?”

It wasn’t worth arguing about. “All right,” she said, looking at the bunch of flowers lying glamorously on her formica kitchen table, next to the letter giving her the computer course date and a red bill for the electricity.

“Good,” he said. “That’s what I’ll do.”

“Thanks for the flowers,” she said. And byebye, smoothie chops, she said silently to the purring receiver.

She turned on the television and saw that the German Chancellor, the British Prime Minister, the French, the Dutch and the Russians were assembling to discuss the Middle Eastern threat. Which was what? she wondered. The transport unions were staging a day of action and the Christmas lights had been turned on in Oxford Street. The new East-West railway line was to go ahead.

Jess rang.

“Horrible,” she said, in response to Jess’s enquiry about the evening. “And I don’t want to see them again. Plus my alleged cousin’s just rung up to ask me out, though he’s married. I’m broke, it’s cold, Christmas is a-coming and I’ve just got back from the girl next door’s funeral.”

“I’m glad I called. It’s nice to have a laugh,” Jess said. “OK – listen. Are you free this evening?”

“I said I’d go to the pub with the neighbours,” Fleur told her.

“What? *The* neighbours?” Jess asked.

“Yes – Dom and Joe.”

“What’s the pub called?”

“The Findhorn Star. What...?”

“I’m there,” Jess said promptly.

“No,” Fleur told her.

“Yes I am,” Jess declared. “Put us together and see what you get. No – wait – I’ll pick you up.”

Jess’s problem, Fleur reflected, was that she was incurably nosy. You couldn’t tell her to get a life because, obviously, she had one, whatever you might think about it. Fleur didn’t look forward to an encounter between Dominic and the prying Jess. “Try to remember Dominic and Joe have just buried their best friend,” she advised.

“Oh, the funeral,” Jess said. “The druggie – yes, I’ll remember.” She broke the connection.

Fleur sighed and went back into the bedroom. She took from the opened box a framed photograph of her grandmother and her grandmother’s sister hand in hand, four and five years old, standing in a meadow high with grass and tall daisies. They were both laughing. She hung the photograph on the bedroom wall.

When Joe and Dominic arrived to collect her she told them, “A friend of mine’s coming. Hope you don’t mind. I’ll see you in the pub.”

Jess turned up in a taxi half an hour later, wearing an expensive red suit and bright lipstick. With her flowing red hair she looked like a burning match. She sped round the flat saying, “Who’s your decorator? Don’t think much of him. You know who does the most fabulous blinds? In Covent Garden – Viv Jenkins.” She made further suggestions for improvements which were quite impossible for Fleur, in her penniless state, to make. Then she flopped into a chair and asked, “What happened at the Jethros’?”

Fleur told her, then said she had sent a brush-off letter to her stepmother. She expected Jess to react badly to this and she did.

“I knew you’d be a silly tart. There you were, going down a treat, even the tough mother-in-law making friendly overtures, inviting you for a holiday – and you have to be stupid.”

“You knew I’d do it and I knew what you’d say,” Fleur said. “So why don’t we go to the pub now?”

“You’d better send a bunch of flowers and another note tomorrow,” Jess said implacably.

“I won’t. Let it go,” Fleur said. “I don’t like the way everyone hangs round Dickie Jethro because of his money. I don’t like the atmosphere there.”

“My God. My God, Fleur Stockley!” Jess cried out, pacing the room in nervy strides, her crinkly red hair jumping about. “This is your future at stake.”

“Stand still,” Fleur said, “and don’t deny you’ve been sniffing something in the Ladies’ somewhere.”

Jess obeyed, meeting Fleur’s gaze defiantly.

“I don’t know what sort of an evening we’re supposed to have,” Fleur said, “with you in this state. Are you sure you don’t want to go home?”

“What the hell, what the hell,” Jess said. “Let’s get out of your luxury apartment and enjoy the charm of Cray Hill.” Going down the steps Jess looked up disparagingly at the sky, as if that, too, were a squalid and downmarket version of the one over other, better areas of the town. “You’d better send that note though, and the flowers. Or you’ll end up working at the checkout in Tesco’s.”

“Shut up,” Fleur said.

Out of old habit they pulled themselves together on entering the pub – best mates, pretty women on a night out. Dominic almost stood up when they came to the table, but thought better of it and slumped back in his seat. Ignoring wide-eyed Joe, Jess said to him, “You must be Dominic.”

“Heard all about me then?” he countered.

Damn, Fleur thought. Damn.

“Just the interesting bits,” Jess told him.

“Well then – my interesting bits are interesting, I’ll grant you that,” Dominic said, sounding Irish on purpose.

“I’m sure,” said Jess, eyes glinting.

Joe struggled to his feet and interrupted, “I’m guessing you came here to have a drink. What’ll it be?”

“I’ll have a vodka and tonic,” Jess replied. “Fleur will have her usual half of lager.”

Joe went off to get them. Dominic and Jess locked eyes. When Joe came back with the drinks Jess said, “Thanks. What’s your line of business, then?”

“Builder,” he told her. “What’s yours?”

“Thanks – another vodka and tonic,” Jess answered. She’d knocked the first one back quickly. “Nice pub,” she added, looking round. “Quiet.”

“Not what you’re used to,” Joe said and went off to get her another vodka.

Jess turned to Fleur. “Do you know this guy Beavis, the Channel Four guy Ben took for a ride?”

“No,” said Fleur. “And I don’t think he wants to know me.” She watched Jess sink the vodka and go off to get another at the bar.

“How’s Ellen?” Fleur asked Dominic and Joe.

“Not too good,” Dominic told her. “Couldn’t be, could she?”

He glanced over at the bar where Jess was putting down an empty glass and picking up a full one. She’d sunk a third vodka standing at the bar. Fleur followed his gaze and was puzzled. Not since they’d been teenagers, swigging bottles stolen from their parents – wine, beer, gin and whisky mixed together – had she seen Jess drinking like this.

Jess came back unsteadily with two drinks, went away and got the other two, sat down, lifted her own glass and said, “Cheers,” to Dominic. She added, “Have you ever thought of modelling?”

He grinned. “Clay or plasticine?”

“No – seriously – with your looks, you’ve got a chance.”

“What – me, brought up by the Christian Brothers, take my jeans off on TV? I could never do it. I’d be all the time thinking of Brother Thomas’s rope landing on my legs. Or Brother Thomas.”

“I could let you have the names of some people if you’re interested,” Jess persisted. “Give me your number – I’ll ask around.”

“Could you try to get me a job as the handsome one’s ugly friend?” Joe asked.

“Is it true you used to live on the street?” Jess asked him.

“Didn’t I used to see you going into the Groucho Club in Dean Street with loads of different blokes?” he retaliated. “I’d be the one in the doorway, huddled in a blanket.”

“I was the one with a job, giving you money.”

“Jewish, are you?” he said, peering at her.

“Yes, as it happens,” she said to him. “Why do you want to know?”

“Just curiosity,” Joe replied.

“We all know about that kind of curiosity.”

“Well, bugger it,” Joe said mildly. “I’m going. I said I’d see Melanie.”

“Made a date at the wake, was it?” enquired Dominic.

“At the party afterwards, whatever you call it. She was upset and one thing led to another. She’s a nice girl,” Joe said.

“Where are you going to offer her a home – on the pavement in Oxford Street – or are you considering Piccadilly Circus?” asked Jess.

“We wouldn’t aim so high – we was thinking of Elephant and Castle,” Joe responded. “Excuse me – got to rush. We’ve got to work out how to lay our thieving hands on a couple of sleeping bags. Cheers Fleur, be lucky Dom.” He held out his hand to Jess. “Got any change?” he asked. Then he was gone.

“That was charming,” Fleur said to Jess.

“I’ll get some more drinks, shall I, while you have a chat?” Dominic offered.

“Do you want another vodka?” Fleur asked Jess.

“Yes. I’ll go for it,” Jess answered.

“Your choice,” said Fleur.

“At least I make them, unlike some,” Jess returned. She looked up at Dominic and smiled. “Get some drinks – then I want to hear all about you.”

When he was at the bar she looked at Fleur. “God – he’s handsome.”

“I noticed you’d noticed,” Fleur said.

Drink and drugs aside, she thought, Jess would never have behaved like this – making passes at Dominic and insulting Joe – with people she considered her equals. The last ten years had seen Jess married to a respected journalist and getting more successful at her job until she’d effectively become Debs Smith’s second-in-command. The Drakes had bought a big house in Highgate and a farmhouse in France. Jess had joined the “media-ocracy”, which, if it didn’t mean having real power, meant contacts with and some influence over those who did. Fleur had done it herself and knew what it felt like, but she’d come down to earth with a bang and joined the punters. Jess hadn’t and that was why she didn’t care what she did here.

Fleur went to the bar, picked up a glass and followed Dominic back to the table.

Jess had an address book out and said to Dominic, “Put your number down and I’ll give you a ring when I’ve fixed up a meeting. We could go out – Fleur could bring her cousin.” She leaned forward. “You see, Fleur’s had this surprise. She’s found out something about herself. I mean, to you and me, Dom, she might look all meek and mild, somewhat depressed if the truth were told, and out of work – *but* – and this is the point – *but*—”

“Shut up, Jess. Just shut up,” said Fleur, leaning towards her. “You’re drunk. I don’t know what’s the matter with you and I don’t care. I’m going home.” She stood up.

Jess said, “If you can call it a home.”

Fleur said to her, “Things change, Jess, you know. Friendships *can* end. I’m going. Are you coming with me or not?”

Jess shook her head. “One day, Fleur, you’ll wake up and think what you’ve lost and you’ll bloody want to kill yourself. Don’t expect me to sympathise.”

“This is money, Jess – only money.”

“Just money. Just money. You’re talking about the most powerful thing in the world.”

“You’ve changed, Jess Stadlen,” Fleur said. “God – how you’ve changed ...”

“You haven’t – that’s the trouble.”

Dominic, too, stood up. He said, “Goodbye, girls. I’m off.” He nodded at both of them and walked away.

“I’ll call you,” Jess called after him. He walked out.

Jess turned to Fleur. “Charming friends you’ve got. Lovely manners.”

“I don’t think you’ve got any right to criticise. This evening hasn’t been fun. I’ll call a cab for you.”

“I’ll come back to your place. I don’t want to sit waiting in this grim pub.”

They walked silently back to Adelaide House. There were no lights on in Dominic’s flat. Fleur thought he wouldn’t want to be there alone. She called a minicab and they both sat waiting for it to arrive. “I’m only trying to help you,” Jess said finally.

“Don’t say any more,” warned Fleur.

“See reason,” Jess appealed.

“‘Money, the most powerful thing in the world’,” Fleur mocked. “Do you know what you sound like?”

“A fucking realist, that’s what. OK – money’s not the most important thing in the world, but it certainly feels like it when you haven’t got any.”

“How the hell would you know?” Fleur questioned, knowing she should not be drawn into the argument, but unable to resist. “You’ve never been without anything.”

“My family were immigrants,” Jess stated.

“Two generations ago,” said Fleur. “And your parents don’t go on like you. Your father would faint if he heard you. It’s the last ten years of hanging around with all those yuppies snorting coke and flashing gold cards about. If you can’t buy it, fuck it and if you can’t do either, throw it away.”

“I loved it,” said Jess.

“Everybody did. Then it changed.”

“For you, maybe. Not for the rest of us. It’s still there, Fleur. Bigger and better than before, maybe a tad more discreet, that’s all. And you can come back. Your father’s your chance.”

The phone rang. The minicab was outside. Jess picked up her bag and charged off. “Think about it,” she said over her shoulder.

Fleur sat down, thinking: Another awful evening, worse than last night.

Dominic rang the bell and edged in cautiously. “She gone?”

Fleur laughed.

“I crept back to the flat as if I was going to rob the place. I didn’t dare come round till I heard your front door close.”

“She’s not always like that. Honest.”

“If you say so,” he replied. “She didn’t seem to take to Joe, did she?”

“She took to you, though,” Fleur said.

“I don’t think she hated me,” he said.

“I could kill her. I told her you’d been at a funeral. She was fucking demented. Basically, she’s depressed.”

“Let’s go to bed,” he suggested. She was in his arms in a flash.

Later he murmured, “I wonder where Joe is.”

“Does it matter?”

“I had a premonition of doom.”

“Don’t,” said Fleur. “You know – you’re terrific.”

“Be careful. I’m not.”

“Don’t believe you.”

“Watch it,” he warned, his arms round her. “Don’t get too close.”

“Can’t get much closer than this.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?”

“You’d better.”

Fleur’s mother rang her the next day as she was about to set out to work the lunchtime shift at the Findhorn Star.

“I haven’t got much time, Grace,” she said. “I’m off to work.” She was feeling frantic. The morning post had included a huge envelope of forwarded mail from the old Verity office. It had included tax demands, letters from creditors and a threat of bankruptcy.

“I don’t mind,” Grace told her. “In fact, I’d just as soon cut this short.” She paused. “It’s slightly awkward.”

Fleur wondered. It wasn’t like her mother to find things awkward. She and Robin lived in a crystal-clear world, achieved by allowing nothing untoward to enter their lives. Faced with an intrusion of unpleasantness, they got the stupid thing under control rapidly, like hitting a badly behaved dog with a rolled-up copy of the *Radio Times*.

Grace started up again. “I’ve had a call from Henry Jones, who I gather you met at your father’s house.” She paused again. Fleur thought – Ouch! She wished she’d mentioned going to meet her father before Grace and Robin heard the news from someone else. And why had Henry Jones got in touch with her mother, she wondered? How had he even got the number? Easily, she supposed. In that world such things were easy.

Grace said, “He told me he had the impression on the basis of that one encounter that you didn’t want to maintain any relationship with your father and his family. He told me your father was quite upset about this.” There was yet another pause, then she went on gallantly, “To cut a long story short, Mr Jones was anxious for me to stress to you how much your father wanted to keep up a relationship with you. Robin and I do find it a little odd but I told him I’d talk to you, pass on the message. Though I told him I thought this was a matter for you and your father to sort out between you.”

Fleur thought of the long years of silence. “You don’t mind me going to visit him?”

“Of course not. He’s your father, after all.”

“He tracked me down. I just don’t want to get involved. I don’t know what he wants from me.”

“I think if he wants to see you occasionally you should comply,” her mother told her.

Fleur was surprised by this approach. “He did leave you when you were pregnant,” she pointed out.

“That was a long time ago, Fleur. I’ve no reason to believe your father’s a bad man. Give him a chance.”

“What does Robin think?”

“Much the same as I do. This isn’t easy to go into over the phone, but I do think you might make an effort.”

“I’ll think it over, Ma. I’ve got to go – I’ll be late at the pub.”

“He might be able to help you,” Grace told her.

“That’s what Jess says.”

“I think she may be right. I’ll let you go – but do think it over.”

“All right.”

“Goodbye, darling.”

“Goodbye.”

Fleur dashed across the road to the pub and as she hurried in Patrick jumped out from behind the bar. “You’ll have to manage on your own for a few hours. My car’s been vandalised. I’ve got to get it sorted.”

Fleur was too busy to think during lunchtime, but when things quietened down she stood behind the bar, staring towards the windows, feeling puzzled. Her mother’s attitude to the phone call baffled her. After twenty-eight years of Jethro silence and neglect an unknown man had telephoned and asked her to intercede with her daughter on behalf of the man who had stepped out on her all those years ago. Fleur would have assumed her mother would resent this, but, no – she’d taken it for granted and done what Jones asked. But, Fleur thought, if her mother didn’t resent Jones’s call, she did. It was cheek, the kind of commanding attitude she’d seen revealed during her evening at Eaton Square: the assumption that if you wanted something you just asked and expected the other person to comply.

She turned and started absent-mindedly dusting the optics. “Henry,” her father would have said, “get hold of Fleur’s mother and persuade her to tell Fleur to love me.” And, “Right,” Henry Jones would have said. “Miss Smith – find the Carew-Stockleys and get them on the phone.” No sooner said than done. Or had her father over the years kept some kind of check on her mother’s doings? It was weird, thought Fleur.

“Miss,” cried a man who, she realised, had been tapping his money on the counter for some time. “Miss – when you’ve finished the dusting do you think I could have a drink?”

In fact there were two customers there. She served them. Weird, that was what it was, she thought again. Her unworldly, socially responsible mother and Jess, her ambitious, socially irresponsible friend – if she still was a friend – both agreed. And she still hadn’t told Dominic about her father – she was worried he’d jeer at her for being a rich girl slumming and assume that made him a bit of rough trade to be picked up, used and then dropped. Not that she was sure, really, what Dominic was to her. And he had never said what she was to him, except to warn her, mysteriously, not to get too close.

A man came up to the bar. “Don’t worry, darling. It may never happen,” he told her.

Next morning a letter arrived from Zoe Andriades inviting Fleur to stay with her, her husband and the Jethros over Christmas at their house in Barbados.

Thirteen

By God, William, if ever you get into one of those moods where you regret a misspent life, what you did, what you missed, where did it all go wrong and so forth, try walking into an out-of-season South Coast pub in the middle of the week. Look at the other punters – a couple of poor old guys nursing a pint – a group of small town boasters who probably went to school together, all in bad leisurewear. Spend an hour or two in a place like that and you'll soon be convinced your own life's been a blissful dream. There's nothing here, William, nothing at all.

Here's some stuff taken from the press at around the time we're thinking about:

Washington Post, September 10th: IRANIAN BOMB NOT A POSSIBILITY.

Daily Telegraph, December 15th: ISRAEL CLAIMS IRAN HAS NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN PRODUCTION. Support is growing in Western official circles for the claims, believed to be based on spy satellite communications, that Iran is on the verge of producing some form of nuclear weaponry. At a press meeting on the Quai d'Orsay, Mr René Drouet, a senior Foreign Ministry official, warned that if Iran had produced or was on the verge of producing any form of nuclear capability the entire balance of power in the Middle East might be affected in the gravest possible way.

Washington Post, December 15th: Though the White House has questioned the possibility that the Iranian leadership has control of nuclear warheads and medium to long-range rocket launchers, intelligence reports from neighbouring Lebanon, Israel and Jordan tend to support the claims, as does France, which has traditionally had good intelligence sources in the region.

BBC World Service, December 16th: The British Foreign Office today refused to either confirm or deny the truth of stories emanating from the Middle East suggesting that the Iranian Government has a silo of nuclear warheads at a secret location. It is claimed with some authority that spy satellites reveal the existence at or near this site...

Not funny, was it, William, when these reports started coming? Less so now, nearly a year later.

But I'll get back to my story. After the abortive attempt to track down the three alleged perpetrators of the supposed robbery at Gordon Mews, having sent in my bill and got paid, I forgot about it.

Then last December, just my bloody luck, round came Gus Prothero. Prothero was a senior desk warrior from the Foreign Office whose chief responsibility, I'd heard, was recruitment. A man who'd never been in the field was, I feared, about to become my handler, spymaster, controller, whatever jargon you want to use.

I said nothing when we sat down. I let him lead. He said, "I believe around four and a half years ago you were asked by the Home Office to make enquiries concerning the whereabouts of three people, two men and a woman."

"By Adrian Pugh," I said firmly, naming names.

"Yes," he said dismissively, as if names didn't matter.

"Floyd, Carter and Whitcombe," I recalled, still obstinately using them. "They were suspected of a burglary and the police had failed to find them. So did I, for that matter."

"They might be easier to find now," he said. "They may have gone back to their old haunts."

Those old haunts again. I wasn't sure about that – it had been five years. I said, "Possibly. Do you want to tell me what this is all about? This is domestic, isn't it? How come you're involved?"

"It's sensitive," he said. "I can't tell you very much. What we'd like you to do is make discreet enquiries in order to find out where these three are. That's all." He gave me a slightly humorous look. "The pay's good. Why ask questions?"

I pointed out to him that I needed to know in whose interest I was working.

“You’ll have a certain amount of protection from us,” he told me. I was not reassured. “In any case,” he said, looking regretful but enjoying himself, “I’m afraid you haven’t much choice. You see” – he paused before dropping his bombshell – “we’re being put under some degree of pressure to reinvestigate what’s been described to me as the Irish Farm episode. I can only persuade those who are eager to see the matter thoroughly investigated not to proceed by pointing out you’re a valuable person engaged in an ongoing project for us. You understand, I’m sure. A new administration keen to see a certain kind of justice done.” He looked at me kindly with my balls in his hand. “I must tell you there’s strong feeling there ought to be a new examination about what happened in Sligo. Which could lead to a trial. Yours.”

“Who are they?” I asked him.

He looked at me hard. “I’m not at liberty to say. But you should take this seriously. I advise you to go and find Floyd et al. It’s not a difficult task.”

I was fed up and furious. But life is full of compromises. As the Frenchman said, if you swallow a toad every morning you can feel fairly certain nothing more unpleasant is going to happen to you during the course of the day. I told him, “You know perfectly well that the mere possibility of an enquiry which might be publicised, and even more a trial, would have serious commercial consequences for me. So, if you can help to avoid this, I’ll take on your job and do it. But I still need more detail. In this kind of secret operation ignorance is dangerous. If I and my operatives are kept in the dark we can make mistakes, because none of us has the experience to make a proper appraisal.”

This was face-saving as much as anything else. He had me over a barrel. I had to take on his shitty job. Pride demanded I make him feel at least a little bit uncomfortable. At the same time what I said was true. “I need to know why, having given up looking for three petty criminals nearly five years ago, you suddenly need to find them. The victim of the robbery must have got over the loss of his snuff-boxes by now.”

“It seems some papers, sensitive commercial material, went astray at the same time,” Gus Prothero told me. “When nothing happened it was thought the material had just been thrown away. Unfortunately, it now looks as if that was not the case.”

“It was never fully proved the people I was looking for were the guilty parties,” I told him. “Are you sure you won’t be wasting time while I root out three suspects who turn out to be innocent after all?”

“We have reason to believe they are the people we want,” Prothero said smoothly.

The rat I’d been smelling all along began, for no reason I could have explained, to swell and take on the dimensions of a computer-enhanced, Technicolor monster rodent. But as I’ve said, I had no choice. He could tell me any fairy story he liked about missing documents; the fact was, he’d threatened me and I had to do what he asked.

I went to try and find the buggers. It wasn’t hard. They must have decided at some point during the previous five years that no one was looking for them any more. Whitcombe was drawing unemployment benefit and had an address in London – Cray Hill, the characterless semi-suburb of London where her mum lived. The other two had been on benefit but signed off. Hoppo did thirty-six hours’ surveillance of the flat in Cray Hill which was on Vanessa Whitcombe’s DSS claim form and confirmed all three – Whitcombe, Carter and Floyd – coming and going. He said they looked much like the three characters in the photofits based on Hamilton’s description when the robbery took place. It couldn’t have been easier.

I rang my pal Prothero and told him my news. I said, “Why didn’t you do this yourselves?”

He didn’t answer, but told me he wanted pictures of the guilty parties, just to make sure, I suppose, that when they sent the coppers round to arrest them they didn’t do what they’ve done in the past – batter the wrong door down, go in mob-handed, put the baby in handcuffs and frighten the old granny into a heart attack, all while being videoed by a neighbour opposite. Scandal, huge damages and meanwhile the people they’ve gone to arrest have taken the hint and cleared off.

Wrong again, Sam Hope. Looking back, I’m amazed by how often I went wrong in this affair, ignored the little clues which should have told me something was wrong. Sometimes your judgement’s off, like having ‘flu in the brain. Because it’s so wrong, you haven’t the judgement to work out how wrong it is.

Through stupidity, vanity, hubris or just the fact that, as I later began to suspect, I’d lost my edge – whatever it was I didn’t ask the right questions.

Just sent Hoppo back to Cray Hill to take some snaps discreetly.

Hoppo came back with the pictures a day later. They showed two of the characters we were looking for – Dominic Floyd and Joe Carter – but not the third. The pictures had been taken in a cemetery and the third, the girl, was the reason they were there. She was being buried.

Because of what later happened, those pictures are burned on my brain. There were a dozen in all. Three showed Floyd standing beside a woman, presumably the bereaved mother, at the graveside. In another three Carter stood under a tree with a girl, looking in the direction of the ceremony. Then three general snaps showing those present and the last three pictured a conversation near the cemetery gates between Floyd, Carter and a tallish young woman, very pretty, with long dark hair. In close-up Carter's face was twisted, like a junkie needing a fix. Floyd in close-up looked serious and sad. He also looked like a film star, but rougher.

I dispatched the photographs to Prothero.

The next time he rang I was away in Central Africa talking to a government about giving them some help against their rebels and training some of their men in my methods. By the time I got back Prothero had already rung four times. One conversation, a small job picked up from one dating back five years, and suddenly he's making nuisance calls. What did he want now? I began to wonder again why he wasn't using his own men. I got a sinking feeling.

I called him up and said, "Prothero, I've done what you asked. I can't do any more. I'm booked right up." This was true, as it happened, but not the whole reason.

The next day a Mr James Robinson called and asked for an appointment. He would not discuss his business over the phone. This phobia being not unusual in my potential clients, I invited him to visit me in my office and we made an appointment for midday next day.

He was a meek-looking guy, balding, with very sharp eyes behind his gold-rimmed specs. He had the air of a man who takes a trip to a factory, looks round the firm's books, closes it down, tells 300 people they're out of a job and then goes home to be bullied by his wife. He suggested we go for lunch.

In the outer office he said to me, "You have some photographs which an associate of yours, Mr Prothero, commissioned. Would you be good enough

to bring them along with you?”

I was about to tell him I didn't want to be part of that business any more when he added, “This could be worth your while, Mr Hope,” in an expressionless way that nevertheless made me think he knew the true meaning of those words. A mixture of greed and sheer curiosity made me turn to Veronica and ask her to get the pictures out of the safe.

She put them in an envelope and we went to a restaurant off Bond Street. It had been planned. Robinson had booked a table.

Once we'd ordered I asked, “So, Mr Robinson, how do you think I can help you? Though I have to say at once, I've already told Mr Prothero I don't want anything more to do with all this. I found the people he was looking for to tidy up the loose ends of a job I ended unsatisfactorily some years ago. I'm unsure now who the subjects are or why they're wanted and because of that I really don't want to be involved any further.”

He put down his soup spoon and asked calmly. “How do you deal with people who have damaging information about you, Mr Hope?”

My hackles started rising, but I kept myself under control. I said, “I'm not quite sure what you mean.” Though I thought I did, all too well. I've been asked to kill people before, obviously, kill them, whack them, assassinate them, eliminate them, silence them. It's a big vocabulary for an act as old as time. I always refuse. We've all got our standards, William.

“We're talking about one hundred thousand pounds,” he told me, confirming what I knew his request to be.

“Each?” I asked him.

“No,” he told me. “That would be the total figure.”

It was still a great deal, for what he wanted.

“Payment in any form you choose,” he added obligingly.

“No,” I told him. “That isn't what I do.” But because of the sum involved and because at least Robinson seemed to have a clear objective and wasn't a slimy double-dealer like Prothero, whose left hand would never know what his right hand was doing, I offered, “I could give you a name if you like.” My trusty right-hand man, Goolies Cunningham, would find me the right person, I knew.

But Robinson shook his head. “I'm afraid not,” he said. “You've been involved from the first. I've been told of your excellent reputation, and I gather your loyalty is assured.” He'd been told HMG had the drop on me.

Proving whoever he was he had friends in high places, who wanted to help him out with whatever problem Floyd and Carter represented. Curiouser and curiouser, I thought. The mist thickened.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. And I was, at turning down one hundred big ones. “But apart from not doing that kind of work, I never work blind. It’s too dangerous for me and for anyone else I might have helping out.”

He looked at me carefully but plainly was not tempted to confide in me. “Well,” he said. “I’d better check the photographs you’ve brought.”

I hadn’t come up to scratch. He was a busy man and lunch was over. I refused coffee politely. He signalled for the bill. It arrived as I handed over the envelope. He put cash on the plate, didn’t want his real name, from his credit card, in the hands of the waiter. Then he opened the envelope.

He looked at the first few, then came across the picture of Carter and the girl. His face didn’t move. It just stiffened and he asked quickly, “Have you a name for this young woman?”

He was interested – he’d been surprised. But I didn’t let on I’d noticed. “No – I’m afraid not,” I said. “She wasn’t part of the job.”

“I should like to find out more about her,” he told me. “Will you do it?”

“No, Mr Robinson,” I said. “I won’t.” I had visions of stalking this unfortunate girl round a council estate and killing her in the dark behind the graffitied community centre, not even knowing why. Somebody else would do it for a thousand. Less. Not me.

Robinson went on looking at the pictures, concentrating on those showing the girl. The more he looked the less he understood, I could see that. And the more worried he got.

When the waiter returned with the change he took some of it, pushed the notes into his pocket and said abruptly, “I’m afraid I have an appointment. I must hurry off. Thank you for your time, Mr Hope.” And he walked away through the tables and into the street.

I ordered myself a brandy and pondered. This Robinson was not normally easily rattled, I suspected. After all, he’d asked me, good as, to knock off two people for a large sum of money without turning a hair. He’d taken my refusal with equal calm. But the girl’s picture had worried him and I wondered why.

Who was Robinson? It looked as if he had to take the pictures back to some principal. So who was he? Robinson’s associate, boss, whoever he

was, could have been part of the story from the start, could have instigated the original search for the burglarious three. And since that time I'd gone from looking for three dossers to being asked to murder the remaining two.

On the way out I waved my wallet at the woman behind the front desk who was answering the phone and taking bookings. I told her my companion had left his wallet behind. As his phone number was in my office I wondered if she by any chance had his number handy, since I wanted to ring him directly to assure him it was safe.

She was too canny to hand over any information and called the number herself. The phone was at the wrong angle for me to be able to see exactly which number she rang but I got the gist. She spoke low into the phone and asked me what my friend's name was. I told her. She spoke the name into the phone then said to me, "They have no one there called Robinson."

I sighed. "Temps again. I'll messenger it over to him this afternoon."

Back in the office I got Veronica to ring a few permutations on the number I thought the woman in the restaurant had dialled. No joy – she came up with an import-export business, a tobacconist, the NatWest Bank's savings department and the rectory of a church. All in the City of London.

It seemed pointless to pursue it any further, partly because anyone challenged with knowing a Robinson would probably deny him, since secrecy seemed to be Robinson's thing. But Veronica's work on the phone did prove to me that there was every chance the mysterious Robinson hailed from the City, that square mile running along the north side of the Thames from Temple Bar to Middlesex Street which, with its banks, insurance companies, the Stock Exchange and so on brings in a quarter of our national income. That's right – a consideration, eh, William? A quarter of our money in Britain is made from money. Not that you don't know that.

Before we left for Christmas I did get Veronica to do one last job for me. After some sleuthing on my part, she popped into some places in Cray Hill and got chatting. And in one pub the girl behind the bar said, "Fleur – she won't be back till after Christmas." So Veronica said, "Oh – what a pity. I've got a card for her. Can you tell me her address – I'll pop it through the door." But then the landlord came up and told Veronica if she'd hand the card over he'd see she got it. So Veronica did, and slipped away. And what I had was a name, a place, and a date for the return, of the girl who'd been at the funeral with Floyd and Carter – the girl whose face had worried Robinson so much.

Fourteen

Fleur looked at the cordial letter of invitation dated December fourth from Zoe Andriades. It had been delightful, Zoe wrote, to meet her. She and her husband would be entertaining the Jethros and a small party of others, including the Keiths, over Christmas at their house in Barbados. She very much hoped Fleur would join them between December eighteenth and January tenth. Guests would travel in a private jet which would take off from an airfield in Kent. It all sounded so easy.

This invitation did not shake Fleur's resolution to stay away from the Jethros. In any case she was supposed to begin her computer course just after the New Year. She rang her mother and had a chat and then said, "About Christmas—" in the comfortable expectation that Grace and Robin would be expecting her. There'd been a disappointment, barely expressed, once before, when she and Ben had decided to spend Christmas together in Morocco and on another occasion when they'd spent the holiday with Ben's parents.

However, this time Grace hesitated. "We have a sort of plan to go with the Harrisons to their time-share in Portugal. Just for a change. But nothing written in stone. It would be lovely to have Christmas at home as usual. Will you come?"

"Not if you've got a plan, Grace. It would be a nice change for you. Do go." She hesitated and realised she had to say, "Actually, I've been invited to Barbados for Christmas – the Jethros – well, Sophia Jethro's parents."

Grace's response was unambiguous. "Darling! How wonderful for you."

Fleur said, "I'm not sure I want to go. It conflicts with the start of my computer course, too."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Fleur. You can defer that. Think of it – Barbados – sunshine – servants to do everything – parties. It sounds absolutely wonderful. And after all, Fleur, it will be a good chance to get to know your father better. And your cousin and his wife. And to get out of that flat for a bit. You'll need some new clothes. Robin and I would be glad to help."

“Not necessary, Ma,” Fleur said and as she put the phone down wondered how her mother knew the Keiths would be among the guests in Barbados. Or even who they were. Guesswork? The gossip columns her mother never read? Or the mysterious Jones on the phone again, this time telling Grace there was an invitation and how nice it would be if Fleur accepted it. Was she being set up? Or was she paranoid?

Fleur looked out of her kitchen window at the rainswept balcony in front of the flat and, feeling like a child rejected by her parents at Christmas, thought, Maybe I’ll go. She couldn’t see herself, Dominic and Joe putting up a Christmas tree at Adelaide House and didn’t really want to try. Her relationship with Dominic had a fragile, out-of-this-world quality. It connected with nothing; they had no shared interests or activities; there was no imaginable future. It felt like some rare Chinese bowl, shapely, intricately painted, with a beautifully mended crack on one side, useless for any practical purpose.

Dominic came into the Findhorn Star late in his working clothes. Because trade was slack Patrick told her to go and sit down with him. Patrick, being Irish, was on Dominic’s side. Before she left the bar he told her, “I can’t guarantee to hold the job open for you if you go away over Christmas.” She’d told him earlier she might be going to Barbados and he hadn’t been pleased.

“What’s this?” Dominic asked as they walked over to the table by the imitation log fire.

“I’m thinking of going to Barbados for Christmas,” she told him.

“Not bad, for somebody on the dole,” he commented.

“Rich relations,” she said.

“Your mum?” he asked her, though he probably knew better.

“No – the others. The new-found lot. My mother and stepfather aren’t rich.”

He looked at her sceptically.

“It’s a long story,” she told him.

“You must tell it to me some time,” he said.

“Give her a break,” said Patrick, who had turned up at the table. He was trying to be fair. “Someone offers you a free trip to Barbados – what would you do?”

“Look at it carefully,” Dominic told him, staring at Fleur. “Joe and me were thinking of going over to my folks in Ireland, with half the building trade in London. Fight our way back, ditto, then get back to building our bank again. The Irish Government should catch us straight off the boat and get us all to knock up a few housing estates while we’re there ...”

“It’s the paddies that built England,” Patrick joined in. He’d been born, he’d told Fleur, in one of the narrow streets they’d torn down to build the Yarborough Estate. His father had worked on it. His grandfather had dug tunnels for the London Underground.

“How long is it since you’ve been back?” Patrick asked Dominic.

“Fifteen years,” Dominic told him. “I left as a boy, when the uncle we lived with got married. My mum and auntie didn’t get on. They’re all still there, though. I called up – there they were and said to come over for Christmas.”

“God bless the farm,” Patrick said piously. “Have you any Irish blood, Fleur?”

Fleur was sitting silent, hardly listening to the conversation. She knew Dominic didn’t want her to go to Barbados. Probably jealous, she thought. Or maybe not.

“I don’t know,” she told Patrick. “I don’t think so.”

“They won’t be the rich side, that’s for sure,” Dominic said.

“That’s the truth,” Patrick confirmed.

All this Celtic solidarity was getting on Fleur’s nerves. She thought it was a conspiracy to punish her for deserting Patrick at the pub’s busiest time of the year and deserting Dominic to go off with rich relations.

“No sun-drenched holidays for the likes of us, Patrick,” Dominic said. “Maybe just a free cruise to Botany Bay if you were one of the unlucky ones.”

“God save Ireland,” Patrick agreed. “Will you have another, Dominic?”

“I will, thank you.”

“Fleur?”

“No thanks,” she said. “I think I’ll go home before you start singing.”

“Ah – the English are a miserable lot,” Dominic told her.

“And goodnight to both of you,” Fleur said and sulked her way home.

Jess had left a message on her machine. “Fleur! Wonderful news about the holiday! I’m jealous. Do you want to borrow some floaty things? Much

love.”

She’d spoken to Grace. It was a campaign. They were planning to kit her out and send her off, like an arranged marriage. It didn’t matter how high-minded they were, like Grace, or ambitious and energetic, like Jess, the middle classes still united if one of their number was living like Fleur. Rule one was, you must not sink, and like dolphins Grace and Jess were going to bear her to safety, out of the shoals of Cray Hill.

A bit later Dominic called round, carrying a bottle of wine and a video.

“Oh Dom,” she said, pulling him in. “Come and sit down and give us a kiss – I might as well tell you about these relations and get you off my back. You’ll have to swear not to tell anybody, though, not even Joe.”

So, cuddled up on the sofa with cups of tea, half watching the action movie Dom had brought over, Fleur told Dominic about the unexpected arrival of Valentine Keith and her first meeting with her father at Eaton Square. As a man in a stained vest shinned up the ventilation duct to escape from the baddies she explained, “I decided not to see them again, but they won’t drop me.” As twenty-five storeys of windows exploded in a shower of glass, she said, “I’m not all that easy about this Barbados trip. I wouldn’t have gone but I’ve had my mother on my case about it. And she’s called Jess to persuade her to get me to go. I don’t know what’s going on – Phew!” she said. The man in the vest was dangling from the building.

“Don’t worry,” Dominic told her. “He gets out of it.”

“What a surprise. You’ve seen it.”

They watched the film peacefully for a little while.

“Swear you won’t tell anybody,” she urged.

“I said I wouldn’t.”

“No – but—”

“I said I wouldn’t so I won’t,” he said stubbornly.

The man in the vest was on a ledge, being shot at. “I suppose they’ll get him in the leg,” Fleur said.

“Right arm,” said Dominic.

“Ah.”

After a pause he said, “I won’t tell anybody. But, be honest, do you like this guy, your father? Because I suppose that’s the point.”

Fleur considered. “He’s charming. He’s a bit of a bully, and” – she suddenly realised – “he frightens me a bit ... Valentine Keith wants me to

be nice to him because he depends on him. My mother wants me to be nice to him because he's my father and Jess wants me to be nice because of the money."

"Say what you like about the woman, at least she's straightforward," Dominic said. "Now me, I wish you wouldn't go to Barbados."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because I'll miss you," he said. "I was planning to invite you to Ireland. Now Joe doesn't really want to come because of Melanie and Melanie can't come because of something to do with her gran – so it's just Joe and me. I'll miss you."

"Nice of you to say that, Dom," she said.

"What do you think I am? Some kind of a cold-hearted alien? I thought I'd better tell you where I was coming from."

"The trouble is, with big sums of money floating around you get confused. I still don't know what to do."

"Try coming to bed."

"That's been on my mind."

"Better get it over with then," he said.

In the morning she said, "I'll stop whinging about going to Barbados. I'll go and when I come back I'll just keep my distance from all of them."

"That's the way," agreed Dominic.

Fifteen

Fleur pulled herself out of the pool on to the sunny terrace with its pots of freshly watered, tumbling flowers, and found her hostess, Zoe Andriades, had come out of the house and was sitting at a table, a man in a white jacket and black trousers bending over her. She waved and Fleur went over, dripping.

“Have you had breakfast? No? Arthur, for two, please ... You’re an early bird. I’m a wreck today. Time zones kill me. But you’re young. You’ve got more stamina.”

“You look very fit and fresh to me,” Fleur said. It was true: Zoe, in a white bathing suit with a thin cotton shirt over her shoulders and her black hair gleaming, looked much younger than she must in reality be.

They had left London at ten in the morning of the previous day and arrived in late afternoon. They then drove in convoy for ten miles through narrow roads and turned off on to a long drive bordered by thick woods of palm and passion fruits, bay and mahogany, a huge half-tamed jungle of darkening trunks, leaves and vines.

This was Barbados, that “Little England” of the Caribbean, only 300 square miles set between the Caribbean and the Atlantic: orderly, beautiful and, as Diana Keith had told Fleur on the plane, “Peaceful and safe. Not like some of the other islands. That’s why the Andriades like it.” She’d added, “Of course, the house is in the most exclusive part of the island. Sandy Lanes – they call it the Platinum Coast. George likes it because of the golf course.”

The residence they arrived at, named Braganza House, was a small, porticoed eighteenth-century building. The nanny of the Keith children, Violet and Jonathan, took them immediately up a sweeping staircase to bed and did not reappear until after they were settled. The remainder of the party walked over cool stone floors, through the house and out on to the terrace. To one side lay a long, two-storey house, newer than the original house, built, perhaps, in the twenties or thirties. On the west-facing terrace a long table had been set near the parapet, on which globe lamps glowed softly. The sun was going down into the bright sea. They ate shellfish,

chilled fish, salads, fruits and cheese and were waited on by two men in white jackets, eager to please. Below the table the guests could see a long expanse of green – the golf course, George Andriades said, a gleam in his eye – and beyond it the gleaming ribbon of the sea.

“It’s like magic,” Fleur said to Fiona Jones. “To think this morning we were in dark, freezing London.” But Fiona, who had been almost silent since they had set off, did not reply. She was both strained and tired and probably, Fleur thought, on some kind of medication intended to reduce stress.

It had not been a hard journey. Fleur had been collected from Adelaide House in a car driven by a uniformed chauffeur. The journey through the early morning streets of London, in darkness, had been rapid and a little over an hour later they were among fields where the little airfield lay. Two or three jets and what looked like a military helicopter were stationed on a vast concrete area. To one side lay the low building containing a lounge where the Andriades’ guests had assembled. They were Valentine and Diana Keith – who was a tall, very thin blonde woman with a down-turned mouth – their children, Violet, a girl of about ten and the boy, Jonathan, perhaps two years younger, and the children’s nanny, a round-faced girl of twenty who looked nervous. There were the Joneses, Henry and Fiona; Fleur herself; the Jethros and the Andriades and, perhaps to relieve the monotony of such a domestic party and provide companionship for Fleur, Hugh Cotter, an aetiolated young man with long hair, a long pale face and an expression of suppressed humour in his eyes. He worked as an auctioneer of fine arts, Sophia said when they introduced him.

Once they were in the air breakfast was served by the stewardess, the Keiths’ nanny assisting. George Andriades was silent over his *Financial Times*, with his wife sitting opposite reading a magazine. Valentine Keith, Dickie Jethro and Henry Jones were chatting over their coffee in the corner of the cabin while Diana Keith made an effort with Fleur. The nanny, Sue, was trying to get the children to take a nap on couches in the back of the plane. A row about an electronic game began.

Diana said to Fleur, “I would have preferred to leave the children with my parents, but Val wouldn’t hear of it. I don’t think he understands that once a woman has children, relaxing holidays become a thing of the past for her. Have you got any brothers and sisters?”

“No,” said Fleur. Then she thought of her unknown stepbrother and stepsister and added, “Well, none I knew about until fairly recently.”

“I suppose you must have known something about your father – his life before,” Diana Keith said. “From magazines and that sort of thing. Dickie’s not unkeen on publicity, really. It’s quite important these days, to have some kind of a public profile.”

Dickie Jethro came up and sat down. “I’m afraid we’re a bit overcrowded, Fleur. Not too uncomfortable?”

“It seems very splendid to me,” Fleur said, “travelling in your own plane.”

“Something of a cattle truck at the moment,” he said.

“I’d really better go and see what Silly Sue is doing with the brats,” Diana Keith said, getting up and walking away.

Val slipped quickly into her seat. “Looking forward to it?” he asked.

“Very much,” she said. She’d been taken over by the excitement of leaving Adelaide House, speeding through silent streets out into the countryside, and now the thrill of being in a plane flying far away to somewhere she’d never been. She still didn’t know what she was doing there, but now she didn’t care.

“A good idea to leave it all behind – get a new perspective,” Jethro said. “Right, Fleur?”

“Right,” she agreed, looking at the man who was her father. He wore chinos and a striped shirt without a tie, his brown-grey hair ruffled and his eyes bright and challenging.

“I suppose you’d really like to make a feature film,” he asked Fleur.

“Not really,” she said, terrified he was going to make her an offer she couldn’t refuse, buy her a studio, a script, a director.

“You’re in films, though,” he said. “Isn’t that the Holy Grail – a full-length film?”

He must have met a lot of would-be film-makers looking for money. “It is,” Fleur said. “But it isn’t what I want to do.”

“What *do* you want?” he asked her.

“I like television,” she explained.

“The Brits have had to,” he said, “because up to now there’s never been a self-sustaining film industry. But say you could choose, big screen, small screen, which would it be?”

“I’d still rather make good television,” she said.

“Fact or fiction?” he asked.

“Either,” she said.

“Tell me about this failed business of yours.”

Fleur told him everything about Verity – the well-thought-of documentaries, the firm’s beginnings based on Ben’s damages from a successful law suit in the USA over a commercial he’d made and her own small legacy from her grandmother. She explained the funding thereafter: Channel Four and personal overdrafts, in her case secured by the flat she’d bought when working. Out of pride she did not expose Ben’s weak control over the firm’s finances or her own stupidity in assuming he had the money side under control. She did not say that she and Ben had been lovers, or that Verity’s creditors were pursuing her. But she thought he knew, or guessed, both things. She did not enjoy the inquisition, but felt better in the end, as if she’d been to see a doctor with some nasty symptoms and found out that a lot of other people had them and that they were treatable.

At the end of his interrogation Jethro said, “You’ll know better next time. We pay for knowledge.”

“I don’t think there’ll be a next time,” she told him.

At this point Henry Jones came up with a message and Dickie Jethro went off with him to the part of the cabin they were evidently using as an improvised office.

Keith bent towards her. “Fascinating story,” he said. “What about this Ben? Where did he go?”

“Last heard of in Miami. That’s the rumour,” Fleur told him.

“Has there been anyone in your life since then?” Val enquired.

“That’s my business,” Fleur told him firmly.

He was about to say something else when Diana came up and told him one of the children had been sick.

Pre-lunch drinks were offered, then lunch and later, Fleur, beginning to feel oppressed in the overcrowded cabin, went to the rear and got out her book. Although the flight was a hundred times more comfortable than the average tourist flight, the strain here came from being with a group of people she barely knew and where, she sensed, currents were always moving. She fell asleep, waking to find the two children to her right, the girl

asleep, the boy absorbed with an electronic game. In front of her were Zoe and Sophia, two well-coiffed heads bent together, speaking in low voices.

“I dropped every hint I could they should take a commercial flight,” Sophia was telling her mother. “They were all ignored. Finally Diana rang up and told me the flights were all booked, though I know they weren’t because Judy Arnott got one later.”

“Dickie’s very annoyed.”

“I know. They were trying to get me to pay for first-class tickets for them.”

Fleur made grunting noises and shifted about in her seat and the conversation halted, then continued again smoothly as Zoe asked her daughter about a picture she was thinking of buying.

They landed at Grantley Adams Airport in brilliant light, though a great sun was setting over a flat, green landscape. The temperature was in the eighties, without humidity. They drove slowly from the airstrip in three cars which had been waiting for them. After ten minutes they were on a narrow road bordered with fields of sugar cane stretching away on both sides. They turned between pillars and started up the drive of Braganza House.

Hugh Cotter, who was sitting next to Fleur in the third car, along with the Keiths’ nanny and the two children, told her, “It’s an eighteenth-century plantation house. Not very big. There’s an extension at the back, bigger than the original house. And a terrace with a view over the golf course and the sea. It’s quite fantastic.”

“You’ve been here before, then?” Fleur asked.

The car stopped and the two children, relieved to have room to run, bolted out, their nanny in pursuit.

“Ghastly sprogs,” Hugh muttered. It was true the Keith children had shown few signs of being likeable, but, Fleur thought, in the spirit of Grace and Robin, they probably weren’t to blame for it. Just the parents.

A tall, slender black woman stood on the steps of the house. Zoe Andriades advanced. “Marie,” she greeted her.

“Welcome. Welcome, madam,” she replied.

They all clustered into a high, marble-floored hall where stood, in a corner, the bust of a bewigged man in marble, with a shining brass plaque beneath. The children and the nanny retreated upstairs, the children protesting, Sue upbraiding. The rest of them followed Zoe down a short

passageway on to the long terrace outside the house. To their right was the lower part of the house, as described by Hugh Cotter; beyond, a mile off, a silver line where the sea and horizon met.

Fleur was in a daze as drinks were served and the long table which had been set up in advance was covered with a cloth and cutlery. Food was ferried rapidly from the house. A man stood by to deflect insects and other predators from the table. She stood at the parapet of the terrace, gazing out. Behind her Valentine Keith and Sophia discussed various activities with which they might entertain themselves during the holiday. "If we can get my father off the golf course we might get him to take the boat to St Lucia," Sophia was saying.

"How many will it take?" Valentine asked.

"Nine or ten," she said. "The children might have to sleep on deck. Fun for them."

"Hm," he replied. "Hope so." Then they all sat down. Zoe and Sophia began to discuss the virtues of the various Caribbean islands as dwelling places – Jamaica, too violent; Antigua, difficulties with residence qualifications; St Lucia, very hilly. Dickie Jethro and George Andriades were mostly silent. This was how it worked with such alpha males, Fleur noticed. They left the others to carry the burden of the conversation, but when they did speak, everybody listened.

Soon enough Zoe stood up, saying, "Fleur – let me show you where you'll be."

Zoe led Fleur to a suite of three rooms. In the white-painted sitting-room a large vase of flowers sat on a low table. Her hostess threw open the bedroom door, which contained a four-poster bed surrounded by light, white curtains. "The curtains are for those phobic about insect attacks at night," she said. "And darling, don't open the shutters. It lets them all in. Also there are bars on the windows, which is rather depressing. Not that there is anything to worry about. It's very peaceful here and Arthur is in the hall all night. Ask him if you want anything."

Fleur sat down on the white sofa for a short while, then had a shower in the luxurious bathroom and, early as it was, went to bed. In her room a pile of new books stood on a table, with water in a cooler and a basket of fruit. Her luggage had already been unpacked and put away.

She woke early next morning, fuzzy-headed, and went out on to the terrace, already cleared of last night's table and with the dampness of a recent hosing just beginning to evaporate. She plunged into the pool. When she emerged Zoe had been there.

One of the servants brought coffee and croissants and little pats of cool butter.

Zoe told Fleur, "There's a party tonight. Have you anything to wear or would you like to borrow something?"

Fleur, tired of offers to kit her out, said, "No, I have a dress, thanks. This is quick, this party."

"I sent some invitations out before we left," Zoe said. "Marie did the rest."

Her portable phone rang and the Keith children burst noisily from the house with Valentine, who looked as if they'd woken him up. He sat at a table dealing with questions of water-skiing, snorkelling and sharks. Then he wearily delegated the rest to the nanny and drifted over to where Zoe and Fleur were sitting. Zoe was saying into the phone, "At least two weeks. George is here for a big rest and we do hope Dickie will try to take some time to relax."

Valentine draped a casual arm over Fleur's shoulders and asked, "How do you like it so far?"

"It's wonderful," Fleur said, standing up and going over to dive into the pool again. Valentine dived in after her. A third splash was Hugh Cotter, who came up under Valentine and somehow hoisted him out of the water and then dropped him back in with a splash. Fleur saw spindly Hugh as the wimpy schoolboy, his only skill swimming, confounding the class thug.

Valentine began to race up and down the pool. When Hugh surfaced he said, "Race?" but Hugh went into a convincing imitation of a dolphin, leaping out of the water, squeaking and squealing, and Fleur laughed so much she nearly drowned.

Hugh fell back in the water and turned up near Fleur. "I'll take you sightseeing this morning," he said. "Do you want to go?"

Fleur said, "Yes," pleased she would have a plan ready when Valentine came up with some proposal such as a walk round a dark cave together or a car tour of the island destined to end up in a motel bedroom.

Others arrived – Fiona Jones, heavily swathed and wearing a large hat, predictably allergic to strong sunshine; Dickie, in a white shirt and trousers, his arm round Henry Jones, who wore a panama hat and held a bunch of faxes in his hand; Diana Keith, a honed and shapely figure in her swimsuit.

Fleur and Hugh explained their plan to Zoe and soon left. Hugh had told Zoe they were going to look round Bridgetown and promised they would be back by lunchtime. But in fact he got the chauffeur to ferry them downhill past the golf course to the beach, where he hired a boat from an old man in a straw hat. While they were waiting for it he sank a glass of white rum at a beach bar while Fleur stood, stunned under the unimaginably blue sky, gazing over the blue, blue sea.

When she turned round Hugh was chatting with a tall, handsome, bare-chested man in a pair of white trousers. Something prompted her to turn back and continue to contemplate the view.

She was not particularly surprised to find out, when a small, ramshackle boat with an outboard motor turned up, that the handsome Bajan was coming with them.

“Don’t worry, Fleur,” Hugh said easily, interpreting her doubtful glance at the boat, “I spent half my holidays here as a boy. That right, Chris?”

“That’s right,” said Chris. He had brown skin, brown hair, a straight nose and broad lips.

Fleur lay back in the boat, listening to the water lapping at its side, not thinking about the sharks which might be no further away than the end of the boat. A water-skier passed with a happy cry. Water slopped into the boat. Huge white birds flew overhead.

“You happy, Fleur?” asked Chris.

“It’s heaven,” she said. She dozed, half listening to Chris and Hugh talking. What she heard confirmed her idea that their meeting had not been entirely accidental. Chris and Hugh had known each other for years and Chris was proposing to come to London to study law, which his parents did not want and could not pay for. Hugh and Chris were working on a scheme.

Down the coast they beached the boat and had fried chicken and beer on the beach. Hugh said, “Hope you don’t mind missing out on the old fort in Bridgetown, Fleur.”

“You could have told me,” she said.

“I’m in a position—” he began.

“I’m not the kind of person those kind of people like,” Chris told her. “You know – I’m an ordinary fellow – I’m Bajan – I work in a garage, drive a taxi. If I came round they’d think I came to rob the house.”

“I’m a poor relation myself,” Fleur said. “I keep wondering when they’re going to produce a big pile of mending or a sick relative for me to look after.”

“I didn’t like to ask,” said Hugh. “How does all that work?”

Fleur explained about her mother and Dickie Jethro, adding, “I still don’t know much about my father’s family.”

“Will you be changing your name to Jethro?” Hugh asked.

The idea surprised Fleur. “No. What for?”

“It’s an overdraft at the bank,” Hugh said bluntly. “So – what do you think, Chris?”

“Let’s get a bus up to St Joseph.”

They boarded a crowded bus and went up narrow roads bordered by rolling canefields and green fields of agile, skinny sheep. They passed a donkey cart driven by a man in jeans and a big straw hat and two goats being driven by a little girl. A boy darted from nowhere to chase a chicken which ran across the road into a field. Outside a wooden house stood a girl holding a huge tortoiseshell cat. It became hotter and hotter in the bus; everyone was talking and laughing.

At a stop where there were a couple of houses, one with chairs outside, they got off and bought some drinks. “We’ll go to the haunted house,” Chris declared. A narrow road, big enough for only one car at a time, led them to a gateway with pillars on either side. They walked up a wide, overgrown path bordered with trees, arriving at a vast colonnaded plantation house. They sat down on leaf-strewn steps outside a large, studded, locked front door and here they drank their cans of drinks. Then Fleur found herself alone. Chris and Hugh had drifted off. No need to ask why, Fleur thought, a little nervous, for she did not know who or what might be near her in the trees, or round a corner of the huge house which, she decided, was very likely to be haunted. However, thinking Hugh and Chris, no matter how urgent their private business, were not very likely to leave her in danger, she got out her book and began, philosophically, to read, looking up often to watch the birds flying up and down the drive between the bordering trees.

About half an hour later, and feeling lonely, she had read two chapters and Chris and Hugh emerged from the trees. No explanations were demanded by Fleur, or provided by them.

On the way back in the bus she felt disgruntled. At first she thought she resented being used by Hugh as a cover for his reunion with Chris, then recognised it was, as much as anything, her own feeling of not having anyone of her own with her. She had been offered luxury, sunshine, white sands, blue sea – all the ingredients of a fabulous holiday – but she really wanted someone to share it with. She thought of Dominic, no doubt walking some muddy Irish lane, and then of Ben – ah, Ben.

She must have sighed because Chris, sitting next to her, asked, “Something on your mind?”

“Lost love,” she replied.

“Ah – that old thing,” he said. “Don’t worry – lost love comes back.”

“Sometimes,” she said.

“And sometimes when it does you don’t want it any more,” he told her. And, though it was so hot, she felt a chill run down her back.

They came back gently in the boat. Hugh and Chris parted on the beach and as they sweated up the hill beside the golf course under hot sun, Hugh asked, “Do you mind not mentioning Chris?”

“I wasn’t going to,” she said.

“It’s difficult for Chris, living here. Not all that easy for me.”

“I won’t say anything,” said Fleur.

They sneaked past two people drinking at the far side of the terrace and dived into the annexe to wash and change for lunch, emerging to find the terrace full of people, all the resident guests and at least ten others Fleur had never met.

“Do come and look,” said Sophia coming up to her and taking her by the arm.

In the drawing-room Fleur saw through the doors, under bright lights on stands, a tall, thin young man and a very pretty, slender young woman with long, glossy hair sitting on a sofa together. His arm was over her shoulders, her head turned up towards him, in traditional wifely adoration. By the fireplace stood a photographer taking pictures of them, while on a padded stool at the couple’s knees sat a well made-up, immaculately coiffed woman, her face turned to them, her legs neatly crossed at the ankle to one

side. She had a notebook on her knee and a tape recorder stood on the floor beside her. The photographer kept moving about taking pictures; the woman with the notebook looked up, enquiringly, listening.

Outside a very tall man in a white suit, his trousers held up with a striped tie, wandered up to Fleur and Sophia. "They don't hurry, do they? Incredible attention to detail."

"We've had to put lunch back," Sophia told him. "I'm so sorry, Joe. Can you bear it? This is Dickie's new daughter, Fleur. Fleur – Joe Cunningham-Roe, a true Bajan. How long have you been here for, Joe?"

"Don't ask me – it's timeless," he said. "How do you do, Miss Jethro?"

"I think we can steal in," Sophia said to Fleur. "Not you, though, Joe. You're too big."

"That's all right. I've got a deal with Arthur to keep the drinks flowing in my direction."

They stepped inside the drawing-room and stood to one side of the window, keeping out of the way, while outside on the terrace a small crowd assembled, looking in. It seemed surreal to Fleur, the people outside in bright sunshine looking in to see two others being photographed being in love.

The situation went, for her, from surreal to shattering when Sophia said, "So – what do you think of your brother in the flesh?"

She was speechless for a moment. "That's my brother? That's my brother in there?"

She peered at him, seeing the back of a dark-haired head and part of a long, pale face.

"I can't believe it," Sophia said. "Zoe didn't tell you?" She looked to one side and saw her mother in the doorway of the drawing-room. "Fleur didn't know," she said.

"I know – I felt dreadful when I remembered. It's all been arranged for so long I took it for granted we all knew. Do you want to come and have a drink, Fleur? It'll still be happening when you get back."

As Fleur went off with Zoe she saw her father coming into the room through the doorway at the back, smartly dressed in a white suit, shirt and tie.

She took some wine and found Hugh Cotter at her side. "It's *Hello!*, isn't it?" she asked him.

“Looks like it,” he said. “I saw the interviewer at a chateau in France where I was trying to buy a picture. The host and hostess were an old rock star and his fourth wife, showing off their new baby. You know that’s your half-brother in there, don’t you?”

“They tell me so,” Fleur said. “I suppose the woman’s his wife or girlfriend.”

“His wife, the former Lady Annie Saxby, former supermodel. I think the super is a bit of an exaggeration. You obviously don’t read the right magazines.”

“Obviously.”

“Well, here you are now,” Hugh said. “Part of it all. ‘Mr Bobby Jethro and his wife Annie Saxby put their troubles behind them and look forward to a radiant future together.’”

Zoe overheard this and gave him a sharp look. “Bobby looked for you when he and Annie first arrived, but you were off scouring the countryside with Hugh,” she said to Fleur. “He was disappointed. So was Dickie.” She peered at Fleur. “I do hope you haven’t got sunburned. Where did you go, Hugh? I sent Charlie off to find you, but he couldn’t see you anywhere.”

“We took a boat, beached it and went up to Sugar Hill – that route,” he told her.

“What a strange choice,” she said. “It’s absolutely primitive. How did you get there?”

“We took a local bus,” he said.

“I don’t believe it. Really, Hugh, that’s almost irresponsible.”

There was nothing Fleur could do to take the heat off Hugh, who was in any case being punished for his indiscreet remarks about *Hello!* magazine. She wandered back to the drawing-room window where people were still assembled, now gazing at the sight of Dickie Jethro standing by the marble fireplace near a huge arrangement of flowers on a side table, his arm round his son’s shoulders. As they looked at each other the photographer moved around them with his camera, while the interviewer remained with the young woman, Bobby’s wife.

Fleur studied her half-brother. He was not very like her, or his father. As she looked she noticed her father pushing back the lick of hair which fell over his son’s face and saw how he did not respond to this gesture in any way. So this was the boy whose photograph she had seen at school. He’d

been about ten then, smiling, seeming happy and confident. But he didn't look like that now, she thought. He was trying, for the photographer, but he was not at ease. Still, she thought, who would be in the circumstances?

The session went on and she lost interest and went over to sit with Henry and Fiona Jones.

"How exciting," she said.

"Pretty different from London, eh?" Henry Jones said.

Fleur had to agree, thinking of Dominic and Joe, and her job at the Findhorn Star. Henry Jones was regarding her steadily and she realised it was quite likely he knew a lot about her, perhaps more than she wanted. "Still, I suppose you've got plenty of friends in London."

"A few. Though, as you say, it's—" She had a sudden vision of standing with Joe while Vanessa's coffin was lowered into the ground. "Different," she weakly ended.

"So much of London is dangerous these days, isn't it?" Fiona Jones said in her flat voice. "Poverty-crime-homelessness. Do you see much of that where you are?"

Fleur, looking at the bright flowers on the terrace and all the well-dressed guests, said, "Some. It's unavoidable, I suppose."

"Your father's involved in a new housing initiative," Henry said. "He's looking into financing the rescue of sink estates in certain areas. There's an emphasis on units for the homeless. The Prime Minister's very interested in getting business support for social projects."

"Sounds good," said Fleur. "Once people have got housing everything else follows, like a job and staying out of trouble. My neighbours are like that. They were on the streets until they got a flat. Then everything changed for them." Two have lives and one's in the ground, she thought.

Henry Jones approved. "That's what the working party keeps hearing," he said. "Are they friends of yours, these neighbours?"

"Sort of," she said weakly.

The tall man, Joe Cunningham-Roe, was at her side. "Sorry to interrupt, Miss Jethro," he said. "They want you for a photograph. Last-minute decision."

"Me?" she said in astonishment.

"Will we ever get any lunch?" Fiona Jones said in a low voice.

Joe shot her a sympathetic look. He said to Fleur, “Apparently Dickie was saying how he’d just caught up with you after many years and suddenly they thought what a nice picture it would make. Come on, sing for your supper,” he encouraged.

“Oh—” said Fleur.

Sophia came up, “Do come, Fleur.”

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“It’ll be fun. People fight to get into these photographs, you know.”

Fleur was hesitant. She had the instinctive prejudice of people involved in the media against being at the other end of the camera. She was also getting tired of being this alien character “Fleur Jethro”, even though she’d decided it would be petty to make a fuss about it. She thought it would be equally petty to refuse to co-operate and that the sooner she agreed the sooner it would be over and everyone would get some lunch. Although snacks were being carried about on trays it was quite obvious the guests were becoming disconsolate about the delayed meal.

Therefore, a few minutes later she was in her stepmother’s bedroom being given a rapid makeover by Sophia and Marie. Sophia buttoned her into a loose cotton frock which had cost an average person’s weekly wages while Marie worked energetically on her hair with mousse and a drier.

Fifteen minutes later Fleur, in the white dress, skilfully made up by Sophia and with her hair prettily rearranged by Marie, was on the terrace being photographed against blue sky, smiling and talking to her father, who was on one side, and then doing the same with the brother she had never met. She felt uncomfortable throughout. Afterwards she asked Marie to tell Zoe she had a headache and was going to rest in her room and sneaked out and across to the wing. She dozed, seeing the fields of cane they had come through on the bus, the flowing green hills, the lush forest around the old, abandoned house.

It was almost three hours later when Marie came in with a tea tray, woke her gently and said, “Mrs Andriades says she hopes you’re feeling better. The early guests for the party are having drinks on the terrace before the party begins.”

It was already nearly dark and a wonderful sunset was streaking the sky with red. She bumped into Hugh standing by the parapet near the wing

away from the groups of people who were clustered in the centre, talking and laughing.

“Hi there,” said Hugh. “Can it be the Fleur of the caption ‘A smiling reunion with a long-lost daughter makes the Jethro family complete’?”

“Shut up,” said Fleur.

“I thought you looked very pretty.”

“Don’t say any more, Hugh. Remember – I know about Chris.”

“She’s got it. I think she’s got it,” he said. “Well done, Fleur. I see you’re not a Jethro for nothing. Blood will out, that’s what I always say. Well, now you’ve got the hang of B for blackmail we mustn’t stand gossiping here.” He held out his arm. “Let me be your escort for the evening. Come on Cinders, you *shall* go to the ball.”

Her half-brother was leaning on the terrace near a group of people, the men in dinner jackets, the women in bright, formal dresses.

“Hullo, Bobby,” said Fleur. “Nice to meet you at last.”

He didn’t seem to take her in at first. “Fleur – sorry,” he said. “How are you doing?” His eyes looked muddled and his face was very pale. Fleur thought he must have been drinking heavily all afternoon.

“Fine,” she said. “A lovely place. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” he said and then broke off and added, “Sorry to be rude, but I must go and find Annie. She’s not feeling too good.” And he went off, not sure-footed, across the terrace in the direction of the house.

“Come on, Fleur,” Hugh said. “Let’s join the merry throng.” He took a step, then stopped, looking towards the drawing-room windows. “Oh – there’s Princess Snobby. Do you know how to curtsy?”

“I couldn’t do it easily,” said Fleur in alarm. She noticed a figure very familiar to her from newspaper pictures coming on to the terrace. The crowd parted, ladies curtsying, then a small group assembled around her.

Sophia joined them, saying in a low voice, with a grimace, “I’ve had to retreat. Her Royal Highness doesn’t like me. She’s only looked in – she’s having dinner on a ship somewhere. Did you have a nice chat with Bobby?”

“Briefly,” was Fleur’s answer.

“Yes,” Sophia said, adding brightly, “Never mind, there’s plenty of time for that later. Now,” she said, “come over here and meet some other people.”

She took Fleur up to a group which included a heavily bronzed, tight-skinned man she recognised as a film star, on whose thick arm leaned a frail blonde with loosely flowing hair and a thin young man in a black shirt and trousers wearing dark glasses. "Must dash," said Sophia. "The King's due at any moment."

Henry Jones came up as the young man said in a South London accent, "Who's the King?"

"He's not yet the King," Henry Jones said. "But some believe he will be."

"Like Prince what's-his-name? Harry?" offered the young man.

"No – that's William," said the frail blonde, whose accent was much like the young man's. "This one's going to be the King of Czechoslovakia or somewhere. No – what is it? Bohemia," she decided.

"Where's that?" he asked.

"Don't come to me for geography lessons," she told him. "You should have paid more attention at school." She leaned back into the film star with a tired sigh.

"Who are you, then?" he asked Fleur.

"If only I knew," Fleur said despairingly.

"Here's a young lady doesn't know who she is, George," he said to someone else. The other man, moustached and bulging out of his dinner jacket, said cheerfully, "Which of us does?" Then he leaned forward and said something to the young man who said, "Bobby – oh – so soon."

Both braced themselves politely as Fleur's father came up and said, "Fleur – can I have a word?"

The princess seemed to have gone already, Fleur noted, as her father led her into the house. The terrace was becoming more and more crowded and a steel band was assembling itself outside the drawing-room while in the drawing-room three girls with long, flowing hair, a violinist, cellist and double bass player, were playing Vivaldi. Dickie politely shook off people who wanted to speak to him and led Fleur across the hall to the library, a large, cool, tile-floored room with a ceiling painting depicting classical figures in battle.

Standing at the far end of the room, looking out of the window, Fleur saw a tall, very familiar figure. He was wearing a loose shirt and cream trousers, his feet were pushed into sandals, his brown hair touched his collar

– and even the sight of his back took Fleur’s breath away. He turned, held out his arms to her and said in the deep voice she had once loved so much, “Fleur – oh Fleur. I’m so glad to be back.”

He was tanned and smiling. She ran to him. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ll leave you two alone,” announced Fleur’s father, and withdrew.

Ben Campbell said into her hair, “God, Fleur. I’m so sorry. Kiss me – please.”

Sixteen

“I didn’t dare come back,” Ben said, holding her closely. “I love you so much, Fleur. And I know I’ve let you down. I couldn’t get in touch – couldn’t face you.”

The library was cool. Self-adjusting air-conditioning kept the books at a constant temperature. Fleur, in Ben’s arms, felt a chill on her back.

He kissed her. “Darling, darling Fleur. Forgive me. I’ll make it right, starting now. I promise you.” She felt his need and his love reaching her and could not resist, did not want to. She thought – why suffer any longer? Why make it hard on both of them? The bad times were over. They could start again and everything would be the way it once was. “I wanted to come back. I used to ring you but didn’t dare speak. What could I say?”

“It’s all right,” she said. “It’s all right.”

“Oh God, Fleur. I’ve been so unhappy.”

“Me too. I didn’t know where you were ...”

“It’s all right now, darling. It’s all right. I want you and I need you—” Then he pulled away, laughing. “We have to go to this party.”

Arm in arm they walked out to the terrace and then he pulled her towards the wing where she was staying. “I’m upstairs,” he said and drew her up the steps to his large room. His bag lay in the middle of the floor. As they fell on to the bed he said, “We must go to this party.”

An hour later Ben ducked into the shower while Fleur lay happily in bed.

“How did you get here?” she called.

He put his head out. “A man, apparently an associate of your stepmother’s father, tracked me down in Miami. He invited me here – *voilà* – I came.” Fleur was impressed, but not surprised, since she knew by now what her father and men like him could manage. Money melted all obstacles.

It had been seven months, she thought. What had Ben been doing all that time? Had there been another woman? He was handsome and charming and gifted – there probably had been a woman. Was there still?

She thought of Dominic and felt herself blushing internally. It was embarrassing, unmentionable. Adelaide House, the debts, the struggle to get

through each day were far off, she thought, best forgotten. And yet she felt edgy and suddenly realised that sleeping with Ben always made her feel a little uneasy. It wasn't a physical effect. It was mental. She'd been so accustomed to it that she never questioned that steady, low-level anxiety she'd felt over the years with Ben. And now she did. Because of Dominic, who didn't make her feel as if there was always something lacking in her, always more to do and achieve, but only with an effort. She suddenly felt confused and ashamed of thinking about Dominic, just as Ben, handsome devil, came out of the shower and climbed into his clothes.

She tidied herself up and they set off for the party. Suddenly her mood changed and she felt as if the burden she had been carrying all these months had dropped from her shoulders. Ben was back. He and she would sort out the problems and return, together, to their old life. They would make more films. And yet there was still that niggling feeling, like a small, persistent pain, which was – had been – she realised, a continuing part of her relationship with Ben. Her fault, she supposed. She'd have to sort herself out.

"Happy, you two?" Sophia called. The steel band was playing, couples danced as waiters moved about. A buffet had been set up near the entrance to the drawing-room. The warm air was full of music and voices and, high above the lights burning round the terrace, huge stars shone in a black sky.

Ben swung her into a dance. The older guests were beginning to leave. The women on stringed instruments packed up to leave. The band played louder and Ben and Fleur danced with the others on the terrace, in and out of the drawing-room. Fleur was ecstatically happy. When they went back to her suite at three, a little drunk, she thought she had never been so joyful in her life.

Later, as she lay dreamily in her bed beside a sleeping Ben, she fully realised how bleak the last half year had been. It's over, she thought. Over. The nagging, insecure feeling she had experienced earlier had gone. Gone for good, she hoped and believed.

She woke early for some reason and went out on to the terrace, where an army of servants was very quietly clearing minor debris and hosing down the paving. Most of the work must have been done overnight. Below, on the golf course, she spotted a figure in evening dress spreadeagled on the green.

Someone brought her a cup of coffee and she sat quietly drinking it and watching the sun come up. The only sound was that of the gulls overhead

and the swishing of the hose. She thought of Ben, lying there asleep. He's back, she thought. It's like a fairy story – all that hardship, then you're allowed your happy ending.

Sophia emerged from the house with Marie, stifling a yawn. Spotting Fleur she came over and said, "Couldn't sleep?"

"Too much champagne," Fleur told her. "What about you?"

"The duties of a hostess," Sophia responded. "You won't mind if I talk to Marie about the plans?" Fleur shook her head and sat in a slight daze as the two women wove a complex web of catering, rooms to be allocated and the availability of staff.

Marie, who was looking tired, took her leave and Sophia, as breakfast came, yawned again and said in apology, "It's like being the captain of a cruise liner."

"The party was a great success," Fleur assured her.

"Dickie liked it, which is slightly unusual. Though he went to bed early. But then, he usually does." She paused. "I think you'll find he wants to help you, Fleur. I expect he'll want to talk to you and Ben soon."

"Oh, I see," Fleur said. She couldn't pretend this was unexpected. Jess had been clear enough about the chances of her father providing her with money. Her mother, she imagined, thought the same way. Internally she flinched a little. Her father had effectively returned Ben to her and now it looked as if he was preparing to fund them. Perhaps it was only that these things were happening too quickly. But, she supposed, men like her father always dealt with matters in this way.

"You look so doubtful," Sophia said and before Fleur could think what to reply Hugh Cotter came up with Joe Cunningham-Roe. Hugh looked hung over and Joe, unshaven, wearing evening trousers, a jacket and no shirt, looked like a recently released hostage.

"Sophia," he said, bowing to her, "thank you for a spiffing evening. But why didn't you pack me off with the chauffeur?"

"How could I, Joe?" said Sophia. "Now – do ask for some breakfast, or whatever you feel up to."

"Bloody Mary," he called to a man watering the pots of flowers and plants. The man disappeared swiftly.

The phalanx of Dickie, George Andriades and Henry Jones came out, all looking fit and fresh, George in golfing clothes and carrying his clubs. They

sat down at another table. “Be with you soon,” Dickie called to his wife.

“The famous merger,” Sophia said with a grimace. “They’ll spend the whole morning talking about it on the golf course. Then there are some American lawyers flying in. There’s no such thing as a holiday with Dickie. He says they bore him and really, they do ...” She appealed to Fleur, “The New York contingent is coming to lunch. Do be there, Fleur, and be nice to them. I haven’t enough women and you’re one of the family now.”

“I’ll do my best,” Fleur said with a grin. “What’s the merger?”

“Dickie does business with a Wall Street firm of bankers,” said Sophia. “Now they’re formalising the arrangement. Don’t ask me any more – I’m very stupid about these things. Don’t ask about anything like that at lunch,” she warned. “Just be as charming as I know you can be.”

Ben came up and she added, “I shall spend the morning getting ready for the bankers. “What will you two do?”

Ben winked at her and she laughed. After breakfast when they went back to Fleur’s suite the sheets had already been changed, the rooms cleaned and the flowers replaced.

They made love. Fleur fell asleep. When she awoke Ben was lying on his back, awake but with his eyes closed. They lay lazily discussing the party. “Don’t let me fall asleep again,” Fleur asked him. “Or not for long. Sophia asked me to be nice to some bankers at lunchtime, so I have to get ready and not be late. We can go sightseeing later on.”

“Wonderful.” He leaned back, his arms above his head. “God – this is amazing.”

“What were you doing in the States?” she asked.

She felt him tense. “First I was trying to get the firm’s money from the company in Atlanta. Finally I got enough out of them to buy a ticket to Hollywood, looked up Adam Chesterfield, who’s there trying to write scripts, lived with him in his one-bedroom apartment and tried to get work. He fixed for me to be assistant director on a TV cop series – one episode – and he only did that because he owed me. They were filming in Miami. I moved into a cheap hotel with roaches, and loathed it. I’m really sorry, Fleur. You know I am. It must have been hell for you, too. Neither of us has had a good time.”

“Sophia told me Dickie might want to give us some help,” she said.

“Wow!” He rolled over to look at her. He kissed her. “Wow! We can settle the debts and get going again. You and me. The old firm.”

Fleur said doubtfully, “I wonder, though, if we couldn’t manage without Dickie’s money. I really don’t – I’m not entitled to it really. I don’t know if I want the obligation—”

“He’s your father, for goodness’ sake,” Ben exclaimed. “He hasn’t done anything for you in the past. He probably wants to make up for it.”

“That’s the point,” Fleur told him. “He doesn’t know me. We were total strangers until two weeks ago. What’s a father after all? Or a mother, for that matter? Your parents are the people who bring you up.”

“He wants to do it, apparently.”

“Supposing I don’t want him to?”

“Come on, Fleur,” he said impatiently. “Forget the past, and all that. He’s a man with a private fortune of half a billion – and then there’s the firm and its ongoing profits. He’d hardly miss what he gave you – we could do with it, and it would give him pleasure.”

“How do you know about the money?” she asked.

“Everybody does. Anyway, Andriades’ agent, a man called Zofkian, told me in Miami. Imagine my face – tracked down, taken to a bar and told there were arrangements for us to meet here.”

“Yes,” said Fleur thoughtfully.

“Look, ducks,” he said. “OK – I suppose we could manage without the money, just about. I could get jobs, I suppose. So could you. But even pulling together like that it would probably mean going bankrupt and then starting again. We’d lose three years of our lives, then have almost no capital. We’d stand a good chance of getting forgotten. We’d have to begin almost from scratch. All that work gone down the drain. But – I could do it. Still,” he ended, “at least you could let him buy you a flat, so we’d have somewhere to live.”

“I’ve got Adelaide House, where I live.”

“A decent flat, I meant,” he said. “But do what you like, Fleur. Jethro’s *your* father, after all.” He swung his legs over the bed. “But I’m telling you, if you refuse, you’ll hurt his feelings. Better get tarted up for lunch now.”

Fleur also got up. She sat on the side of the bed. “I’ve been photographed for *Hello!*” she told him.

“With your father?”

“Yes.”

“That’ll help with the bank,” he announced. “It’s not actually *having* money. It’s being seen near it. It brushes off, like pollen.”

There were sixteen people for lunch, a buffet of hot and cold dishes at a table, piled, like in a painting, with fruits and meat and seafood. Fleur sat at a table and chatted with Jim Arnoldson, one of the bankers from New York, and his wife. They were very polite to her – a great deal more attentive, she thought, than if she had not been the daughter of the man with whom they were doing business – but in the end she gave up and let the men talk business while she chatted with the wife.

The servants laid out fantastic cakes, meringue and vast sculpted ices. Fleur looked at the colourful, sugar-scented array and at the earlier part of the buffet, still in place for late-comers and could hardly believe in such an abundance, such an elaboration of food for so few people. She wondered where the leftovers went, but did not like to ask.

Bobby and his wife were loading plates with meringue and ice cream while a banker’s wife and Julia Arnoldson were discussing lace. Fleur’s eyes drifted towards her half-brother and his wife and then she suddenly realised what the situation was with her half-brother and Lady Annie. There was the pallor, the thinness and now the sugar craving. They were heroin addicts.

“Now – those who’d like a tour of the island ending up in Bridgetown will find cars outside,” Fleur’s father offered when lunch was over. “But Fleur and Ben have to miss the trip – Fleur, I’d like to talk to you and Ben for half an hour, if that’s all right.” He looked across the terrace to where Ben was talking to Jim Arnoldson and the lawyer. “Ben,” he called out, “I need you. Can you tear yourself away?”

Ben came over and Jethro, taking Ben by one arm and linking his other in Fleur’s, led them off the terrace saying, “Interview in the library. Don’t worry, Ben. I’m not going to ask you your intentions.”

“My intentions are honourable in any case,” Ben replied.

In the coolness of the library Jethro said, “Let’s all sit down, shall we?”

He took a chair by the marble fireplace. Fleur opposite, with her hands tidily in her lap, had the sensation of seeing the head about exam options, or career choices. Her father gazed at her. Now that she had his full attention she felt as if trapped in a powerful beam. His eyes seemed bigger than other

people's, his head, too, somehow larger, like a lion's. Ben, meanwhile, had seated himself on a leather chair against the wall, further away from Fleur and Dickie, making himself a third corner of the triangle.

Dickie looked at her. He said, "We're almost strangers yet, though you may not believe it, I've thought of you over the years. I told your mother before you were born that I didn't have the time or energy for marriage and children then. I was twenty-five and I'd just started my career in the City of London. I had the desperation of a young man who wants to make his mark in the world. Your mother wanted a home, however small, and children. I knew if that happened I was finished. I told her – well, you know what I told her. But that didn't mean I forgot you – you know that. But as for seeing you, your mother thought it best if I stayed away. It was her right to make that decision after what I'd done and not done. I accepted it. I hope you understand."

Fleur nodded, though she'd never been told that Dickie had wanted to see her and that her mother had denied him this. Either he was lying or her mother had withheld the information. She couldn't remember ever having directly asked if her father had wanted to see her. Had she done so, Grace would not have lied to her. On the other hand, if she'd never asked, Grace might not have felt obliged to tell the truth.

In fact, she was realising more and more, Grace had always made it difficult to discuss anything about her father. If the topic began to drift in that direction, Grace began to look pained. Fleur thought that as a means of control looking pained was probably as good as any – efficient and undetectable. Then she blamed herself for this disloyal thought. After all, Grace had given her life, in opposition to the man sitting across from her, who had recommended abortion. She said, "Grace never told me you'd tried to see me."

"She probably thought it the best thing to do," he said. "My last attempt was twelve years ago." About the time she was studying the photograph of the happy Jethros in the magazine, Fleur reflected. If, as it seemed, his daughter had more or less disappeared and his son was a drug addict, and married to another one, that story had not ended very well.

"The past, though," her father said, leaning forward, "is over and done with. What we have to do now is think about the future. We've found each other, you and I, and I want to treat you much as your brother and sister have been treated. To that end I want to set up a trust fund of two hundred

and fifty thousand pounds the income of which will be available to you during my lifetime, the capital to go to you after my death. Henry Jones is handling all this and can give you all the details. Take his advice if you can. He's always right. That'll be in place in a month or so. Henry will also arrange to settle the business debts you contracted last year and previously. And I think you should buy somewhere to live straight away. He'll tell you the best way to do that, how to manage a mortgage in the most advantageous way. You might decide to start up the film company again, in a modest way. You might want to go and live in the country and have babies." He smiled. "That's it, in outline. But whatever you do I would advise asking Henry's wise counsel. I always do. I'm the accelerator. He's the brake. In my experience no serious business can thrive without that. That's why," he said, glancing over at Ben, "I have high hopes for your revived film company – if you decide on that course you can do well, with Ben here rushing forward, full of ideas and you, Fleur, being the calming influence, the steady head. Thank God for women," he said to Ben. "They have children. Nature constructed them to keep steady."

Ben smiled at him in agreement and Fleur told her father, "This is very generous of you."

"It's the least I can do after such a long parting," he said.

They hadn't so much parted as never met, Fleur thought and it was perhaps this slight cosmeticisation of the reality that enabled her to pluck up courage and say, "I'd like to think it all over for a day or two."

His eyes were startled as he answered, "There's not too much to think over, is there?"

"I shouldn't have thought so," Ben said.

"Perhaps there isn't," Fleur told Dickie. "But this is such a shock. Your generosity. I'd like to think about it."

Dickie was still disconcerted, perhaps even annoyed. "Very well," he said. "Think about my offer then, but please don't take too long." He left the room.

Ben was on his feet immediately. "Are you insane? Are you trying to alienate your father? What are you talking about – thinking it over? I wouldn't be surprised if he thought you were going to try to get a better deal than the one he's offered. He must be furious."

“I just want time to think, that’s all,” said Fleur. “But I can see he might not be too pleased with me.”

“Really?” mocked Ben. “He was probably expecting heartfelt thanks, possibly with a few tears of gratitude thrown in, since he was offering you a quarter of a million quid, and the rest.”

“I couldn’t respond properly,” she told him.

“It was shock,” he said. He opened his arms. “Come here. Do you realise what’s happened? You’re well off – the firm’s straight again – we can start work when we feel like it. Today, if we want.”

Fleur went into his arms and kissed him. He pressed his mouth on hers, hard, then harder. He wanted her to share his joy and relief and somehow she couldn’t.

He murmured, “Look – you don’t need to take time to think for days and days. Just go to him and throw yourself at his feet and say thanks.”

“I think I’ll go for a walk,” she said.

“I’ll come along—”

She cut him off. “No – I’ll go on my own and have a quiet think.”

He shrugged, disappointed, and said, “OK – I’ll see you.”

Fleur didn’t even stop to get a hat. She hurried from the library through the hall to the front door, went down the long drive and then turned right downhill on the narrow path leading to the golf course. She’d go down to the beach, she thought, and sit there and think.

The heat had hit her like a bomb when she’d left the house, although the overhanging trees of the drive had offered some protection. By the time she was away from them and going downhill in the full heat she felt she was being boiled alive.

She reached the beach red and sweating and almost regretting her hasty flight. However, once she had bought a Coke at the beach bar and sat down further off on a long white stretch of sand she felt better and calmed, looking out at the endless blue stretching all the way to Latin America. Even so, her head buzzed with thoughts. If she turned her father’s offer down, he would be angry and Ben would be very unhappy with her. She wouldn’t have a sensible reason to give. Everyone in the house would know and disapprove of what she’d done. Without the money she and Ben would have to struggle, do work they didn’t enjoy to repay the company debts, and be always chasing a deal that would enable them to make the films they

wanted. And she had to face the fact that Ben might not stick around for the years it took to do this. He'd handled the last crisis by running away, allegedly in pursuit of an unpaid debt. When he'd had trouble getting the money he'd stayed out of touch for six long months. He wasn't the hero of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, she had to admit, ready to struggle through tribulation to redemption. More the man for the fairy story, she thought ruefully.

She suddenly remembered being left, not knowing what was happening, feeling lonely, betrayed and incredulous. She couldn't face that again, she thought. She just couldn't. And now her father had held out the chance to begin again and start a new, productive life with Ben. Like the reversed end of the country-and-western song – you get your job back, your wife returns to you, your dead dog comes back to life.

Yet she didn't want the money, she knew that now, though she wasn't sure why. Did she think she would be at fault in some way if she accepted money from her father? Did she think, if she took the money, she might be committing herself to doing something she might not want to do? If so – what was it? Or was it her parents' puritanical attitude towards money and big business which was influencing her?

Her head was spinning now. The more she thought, the less she understood.

"Don't worry – be happy," said a voice above her. She looked sideways to see a pair of long brown legs in sandals. Terrific, she thought, this is all I need, to be hit on by one of the locals.

She looked up, ready for trouble, and realised the man beside her was Hugh's boyfriend Chris.

"You shouldn't be sitting here bare-headed, you know. You should get in the shade, have a long drink. Let me be honest – you don't look so good."

"I suppose you're right," she said.

"I'll drive you back up," he offered.

"I don't want to go," she said.

Then Hugh was beside her, saying, "Fleur. You're getting sunstroke. You need to go to bed."

"I've only been out for an hour," she said.

"That's all it takes," he told her grimly.

They were planning to get a car from Chris's garage to ferry Hugh and Fleur home when the chauffeur from Braganza House appeared, walking over the sand.

"Go back," Fleur told him. "We're getting a car."

"Come on, Fleur," Hugh said reasonably. "He's here now. Let's get in the car."

They left Chris behind on the beach. "Have you had a row up at the house?" asked Hugh as they walked back across the beach behind the chauffeur.

She denied this, not revealing that the only problem was that her father had offered to set her up for life. She staggered a bit and he quickly grasped her arm. "It's culture shock," she told him. "It's prolonged exposure to the rich and famous."

"Prolonged exposure to the sun's got something to do with it. Look – they like you. And Ben's a very nice man and here you are together. Why not enjoy it?"

"All right," she said mournfully.

"The plan is, dinner at the Sandy Lane Hotel this evening – the chef's got orders to outdo himself – and tomorrow we're taking a four-day cruise to St Lucia on George's boat. It's a massive thing, sleeps at least ten. We'll be back on Christmas Eve," he told her. They got in the car.

Four days on board with all the protagonists in the Fleur Jethro Aid project would be awkward, Fleur thought. If she hadn't made up her mind there'd be a question hanging over her. Because, she realised, taking the money was a loyalty pledge, not just acceptance of a sum of cash. And if she'd actually refused the money before they set out, the trip would be a nightmare. It looked as if she'd have to accept, or skip the trip.

"How are you feeling?" Hugh asked her.

"Not too good," she answered truthfully. She was now shivering in the air-conditioned car.

"Better get to bed as soon as we're back."

But Sophia and Henry Jones were in the hall when they entered. Henry said, "Any chance of a word, Fleur?" and led her into the empty drawing-room. Outside she could see the Keith children and their nanny and hear the children's excited cries as they splashed in and out of the pool.

They sat down near the window with a small table between them. He told her, "I just wanted to go through a few details about the settlement with you. It's tedious but necessary, I'm afraid."

"I haven't quite made up my mind yet," she began feebly. She was shaking now and felt a little feverish.

Henry did not notice. He said, "I'm sure you'll do the sensible thing. Apart from your own interests, Dickie would be very upset if you refused."

"Would he cut me off, do you think?" she asked.

He frowned. "I can't say. But if you were to refuse his generosity now he might take the view that you had no claim on him after his death. Why?"

"I don't mean financially. I meant emotionally. Would he want to see me any more if I said no?"

"I really couldn't say," Henry said. He looked at her earnestly. "Can I ask you why you're hesitating?"

"I think money changing hands alters things. In the case of what he's offering it's a lot of money, so it'd make a big alteration."

"Fleur," he said, leaning forward, "please don't do this. The sum is large in your terms, not in your father's. He really wants to help you. But to be quite frank, if you refuse you do risk alienating him and, to be even franker, I don't think your friend Ben would be altogether pleased. I gather that part of the money offered would be going to pay off debts you jointly contracted."

She had seen her father go out on to the terrace and bury himself in a chair with his hat over his eyes, watching the Keith children in the pool. Henry Jones followed her eyes. He said in a low voice, "I believe Dickie would like to see his grandchildren like that."

She only said in a low voice, "I think I'd better go and talk to him again."

Henry said coldly, "Very well," and left the room.

She found Ben outside. He came up to her and asked, "Have you been sorting things out with Henry Jones?"

Walking past him, she told him, "I'm not going to take it," and went straight up to her father, asking, "Dickie – could we talk?"

He got up immediately. Going into the house, they passed Sophia, Julia, Arnoldson, Zoe and the banker's wife, all dressed for town and carrying parcels. Sophia's eyes narrowed a little as Dickie said, "We're just going to

have a chat. Not to be disturbed.” As they went through the doorway she turned back to look at Ben, standing in the middle of the terrace. His face was stony.

Out on the terrace Zoe said to Ben, “We’re taking a cruise to St Lucia, just for relaxation. I hope you and Fleur will come? Oh – Joe,” she said to Joe Cunningham-Roe, “will you come to St Lucia with us on *Sea Queen Athena*?”

“I’d love to,” he said. “We could look in on some friends of mine – Jack Lauderdale? He’s bought Carrie Hassett’s place – they’ve got two charming daughters, both supermodels.”

Ben asked Hugh, “Where did you find Fleur?”

“On the beach,” he said. “She was sitting there thinking, but without a hat. I don’t think she’s a hundred per cent.”

“Sick? Sunstroke?” he questioned.

“Could be,” Hugh said. “I really like Fleur. There’s a lot going on inside. She’s quite sensitive but quite sensible. Pretty bright, too.”

“Fleur’s great,” said Ben. “Attractive, too.”

Hugh nodded. “All that.”

In the darkened study Fleur was telling her father, “I must seem very ungrateful but I think it’s important to make my own way. You did, after all.”

“Do you know how hard that was?”

“So hard you didn’t have time for a wife and child,” said Fleur cruelly, regretting it immediately. She heard the slight sound of the air-conditioning drumming in her ears. Her father looked at her impassively. “I mean,” she said, “what you did was quite natural, but, well, it’s too late now. And I was brought up to earn my own living. It’s stupid, I know—”

“It’s very stupid, especially if you’re about to be bankrupted, as you are.”

“I’m just going to work my own way through,” said Fleur, annoyed that he was talking to her so roughly.

“And how are you going to do that? I’m offering you a new start—”

“And I’m more than grateful,” she interrupted. “But I’ve never had anything from you and I don’t want it now. I’m sorry.”

“So am I, my dear,” he said grimly. “So am I.” And for a second time he stood up and ended the interview by walking to the door. His hand on the doorknob, he turned and said, “Don’t let it end here. If you reconsider, talk to me.”

Fleur sat dazed in her chair. Now she felt cold, then hot. A touch of the sun, she knew. But that was not the only reason why she felt awful. I never wanted to come here, she thought. Grace and Jess persuaded me, but I was right. I should never have come. Then the door opened and Ben came in.

“Fleur, what’s going on?” he asked, kneeling down and taking her hands. “Are you all right? Hugh said you might have sunstroke.”

“Yes. I’d better go to bed.”

He pulled her up, held her close. “Best thing – you’re shaking. But look, before we leave the room, tell me what’s been going on. Is there a problem?”

“I’ve refused what Dickie offered me,” she said.

“I don’t believe it,” he said, horrified. “My God, Fleur, why did you do that?”

“It didn’t feel right.”

“Oh—” he said, about to say more, but holding back. “Never mind. You’re not well. Let’s get you to bed.”

He supported her from the room. They crossed the terrace, Fleur drooping against him, and went towards the new house. He was helping her to slip her dress over her head in the bedroom when Sophia knocked and came into the sitting-room. “Can I come in?” she called.

“Yes,” said Fleur. She put on her nightdress and lay back on the bed, her head whirling. She heard Sophia say to Ben, “What’s the matter?”

“Sun, I think,” he said.

Sophia stood away from the bed and said, “Fleur, I’ll get Dr Browne. He’s very good. And Marie will come in and see what you want. Have a rest for now.”

“Sorry, Sophia,” Fleur mumbled.

After Sophia had gone Fleur closed her eyes. Ben sat beside her, holding her hand. “What possessed you to sit out in the direct sun without a hat?” he asked.

“I wasn’t thinking. I was rattled by Dickie’s offer. I didn’t know what to do. I ran for it. I think I want to go back to London.”

“Fleur,” he said, kissing her, “Fleur – you’re not well. You shouldn’t be making any decisions just now. Lie quietly, wait for the doctor. You’ll soon feel better. I’ll get you some water, you’re dehydrated.”

Fleur relaxed, feeling peaceful and protected. Ben came back with the water and said, “Drink it slowly. You look so nice in that bed – I’d like to get in with you, but I don’t think it would look OK, with the doctor coming.”

Entering, Marie said, “Good – water, that’s the best thing.” Peering down at Fleur she said, “I think it’s not too bad. A day or two will fix it. Don’t worry – English people do this, especially in the winter, even the West Indian people who live in Britain come here and act the same. I’ve brought some nice cool lemonade.”

Valentine Keith appeared in the doorway, an intent look on his face. “Sorry, Fleur. I know you’re not too good, but could I have a word?”

“What?” she said.

“It’s a bit urgent, that’s the thing.”

Marie, expressionless, intervened, “The doctor’s on his way – why don’t you wait until he’s seen her?”

“OK,” he said. “Right – OK. I’ll wait in the other room.” He left the bedroom.

“I’ll go and have a word with him, find out what he wants,” Ben told her and also left the room.

Marie, looking wry, said, “Now, you have a bell. You ring it if you need anything – anything at all,” she repeated with a little emphasis.

“Thanks,” Fleur said.

Marie left and less than five minutes later Ben and Valentine, who she’d heard talking together in low voices in the other room, came in together.

“It’s like this, darling,” Ben said, and somehow Fleur was no longer reassured by his presence. A kind of wariness came over her.

“You see,” Ben said, “Val’s got something Dickie thinks you ought to know. He asked Val to come and explain.”

Lying in bed, she felt trapped but thought wearily she might as well get Val’s statement over and done with, so that he would go away. “All right,” she said.

Val came in with assurance and sat in a chair Ben brought for him from the sitting-room. He himself sat on the bed. They both looked at Fleur as

Val spoke.

“Dickie just wanted me to give you a few facts. He got the impression there were things you didn’t know.”

“OK,” Fleur agreed.

“He wonders if you know the extent of his financial support to your mother. As soon as he could, which was two years after your birth, he started making her a regular allowance. He also paid your school fees.”

“What?” said Fleur. She was astonished.

“This hasn’t been mentioned to you?”

“No,” Fleur replied, quite bewildered, not knowing what to believe.

“That’s the impression he got. He doesn’t want to make a big issue of it, it’s only that he got the idea you believe he’d been more negligent towards you than he had been. Whereas, up to a point, he did his best. He was just wondering if knowing he hadn’t been a complete bastard to your mother and you might make a difference to your decision now.”

“I’m not sure I believe all this,” said Fleur. She was feeling really ill now and the proximity of the two men was oppressive.

“He just doesn’t want you to turn him down flatly, too fast, especially as obviously you’re not very well,” Valentine explained. “And let me tell you, a concession like that from Dickie Jethro is unusual. Normally he wants things done quickly, or not at all.”

“Give him a break, Fleur,” Ben urged. “It does look as if Grace and Robin didn’t tell you the whole story. I must admit I used to wonder a bit how they supported that lifestyle on Robin’s earnings. I thought probably your mother had some money of her own. All that plain living and high thinking doesn’t come cheap, you know.”

The awful thing was, Fleur realised, Ben had a point. She’d never questioned her own family’s circumstances at all. Throughout her childhood she’d been given to understand that some people – Jess’s parents, for example – had a lot of money, while her family lived more modestly, driving old cars and taking inexpensive holidays. The implication was that this lifestyle was somehow more worthy than others. But her parents never discussed money, unlike the Stadlens, whose family economics were openly, even brutally, discussed whenever they felt like it, something Fleur found intimidating and even shocking.

The news that the lives of the Carew-Stockleys were based on the City of London and its – from their viewpoint – unsavoury antics pulled the rug out from under her. If this was true, her parents had been less than candid with her. In fact, it meant they'd been keeping their not uncomfortable life at Yarrow St Mary going on money that had been given to them by the kind of man they strongly disapproved of, because twenty-eight years earlier that man had had an affair with a young dancer and absconded, leaving a child behind.

Part of her simply couldn't believe Val's story. Another part of her knew it was unlikely a practical man like Dickie Jethro would tell a lie it would be so easy to disprove.

"I'll ask Grace," was all she could say. She said it to Ben.

"I can't see that it makes any difference anyway," said Ben. "The point is, what are you going to do now?"

"If I don't accept," Fleur asked Val, "will he stop the money he's paying to Grace and Robin?"

"I really don't know," said Valentine. "I just can't understand why you don't accept his generosity, with thanks. Look at how you're living, Fleur."

"Could you leave me for a bit, while I think?" she said weakly.

"Of course, darling," said Ben. "This must all have come as a bit of a shock."

"You can say that again," she told him.

The doctor came in, and after examining her declared Fleur was suffering from the kind of ailment common to visitors from Britain intoxicated by the sight of the sun. He advised a few days' rest out of direct sunshine and plenty of fluids.

Fleur was left alone after he departed until Sophia came in.

"Poor thing," she said, "and now you'll miss the cruise to St Lucia. The doctor says better not. I can't cancel it now – too many people are involved, and Zoe's been pining to go ever since we arrived. She's so delighted George has agreed. I'm dreadfully sorry, Fleur. Marie will look after you, of course, and would you like Ben to stay?"

"No – don't spoil it for him," Fleur said.

"Let's see what he says," Sophia replied briskly. "Anyway, a fresh lot of books has arrived and we'll move the television in here and you can lie quietly and get better."

Fleur dozed. It was Ben who returned half an hour later, carrying a pile of books on top of a TV set. Sweating, he set it up and put the books on the bedside table. He sat down beside her and asked, "What do you think? Should I stay with you or go to St Lucia?"

"Oh, do go," said Fleur. "After all, I brought this on myself. It'd be a shame to miss the trip."

"If you're really sure?" he said.

"The place is full of servants – I won't be alone," she told him.

"You're a darling," he said, kissing her. "Listen – it's time for dinner. You need to rest – I'll go now and come back afterwards."

Fleur dozed again. When she woke after another hour she saw clearly her world had shuddered on its axis. She must find out exactly what Dickie Jethro had or had not done for her parents and what, if anything, he was still doing. If he was still paying money to Grace, she decided gloomily, that would explain why she was here in Barbados. Grace would have considered that the financial obligation to her father meant she should push Fleur into going on the holiday. Recruiting Jess to help, too, Fleur thought.

She got up and went into the living-room. She dialled her parents' number in Britain, though she thought they had probably already left for Portugal. The phone was not answered, so she rang Grace's cleaner and asked her if she had a number for the family in Portugal. She had, and gave it to Fleur who rang it.

The phone was answered by Jim Harrison, who fetched Grace.

"Darling – is anything the matter?"

"No, Mum. No," said Fleur. Now it came to the point it was awkward to ask about Dickie's money over the phone.

But she drew a deep breath and said, "Look, Grace. This is rather difficult. My father's offered me money, a trust fund, but I turned him down. Whereupon he sent my cousin to tell me he'd been giving you an allowance since I was two. He'd paid my school fees. He seemed to think this would make a difference to my decision and somehow – well, it does alter things. So I thought I'd better ask you."

"Oh, my goodness, Fleur. You refused. Why?"

"I didn't want to be beholden to him," Fleur said, pleased to be able to retrieve this quaint, old-fashioned term, with its atmosphere of relationships between wards and guardians, governesses and their masters.

“That’s a rather strange way of looking at it,” her mother said. “He’s your father. He owes you something, surely? I’m sure that’s how he sees it.”

“But about the money – is what Valentine said true?” Fleur broke in, knowing her mother was trying to evade her question. She told herself firmly that if the information Val had given her had upset her she was entitled to upset Grace in turn. It was Grace who had accepted – or not – Dickie Jethro’s money, and had actually, she recalled, allowed Fleur to think the fees for the school she’d been to, though gladly paid, had strained family finances. She waited for Grace’s answer.

“Of course it is,” Grace told her, as if stating nothing unusual. “When you were two, and I had no way of going on dancing, with a child, your father offered to pay me an allowance. I accepted. I had no choice.”

Fleur had grown up with the knowledge that she had put paid to her mother’s career. What she had never known was that she had received regular support from her father.

“You never told me,” she said.

“I never saw any reason to,” Grace replied. “Fleur – I’m standing in the hall here. It’s a rather embarrassing conversation to be forced to have—”

“Yes, I understand. I’m sorry. But tell me – is this still going on?”

“I beg your pardon, Fleur,” her mother said, a chill in her voice.

“The allowance,” said Fleur.

“I really don’t think I want—”

“It’s not a hard question to answer,” Fleur said, in a tone she did not usually use to her mother.

“You sound angry,” Grace observed.

“I’m not angry. I’m in an awkward position here. I didn’t know you and Dickie had a financial arrangement.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes,” her mother said. “I think the best thing is to get Robin to ring you later. This is the sort of thing he does better. Meanwhile, my advice is, reconsider your father’s offer.”

“Grace – I’d be very pleased to talk to Robin, but this is your business. Would you please tell me.”

“About what?” Grace said prevaricating. To Fleur, the conversation was like a sword fight in the mist.

“What I asked. The allowance—”

“I’ll really have to get Robin to ring you,” said her mother sounding rattled. “Goodbye, darling. So glad you’re having a nice time.” And she broke the connection.

Fleur was incredulous. Her mother had dodged the question and hung up when Fleur pressed it, very peculiar for a person who had always advocated candour and straightforwardness, to be tempered only where kindness or civility demanded. Well, thought Fleur, anyone was entitled to break their own rules once in a while. But Grace’s evasions made it look very much as if the good life at Yarrow St Mary was supported by Dickie Jethro’s payments.

She went back to bed, not feeling well, picked up a book and fell asleep again. Ben came in after dinner and slipped into bed with her, smelling of brandy. Fleur snuggled up to him.

“Sorry I didn’t come sooner,” he murmured.

“You’re here now.”

He kissed her. “Oh Fleur.”

“Oh Ben. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Later, leaning back, he said, “I was talking to that American, Jim Arnoldson. He said there’s a big entertainment department at the legal firm he’s connected with. The bigger operations are taking over quite a lot of film financing, he said, fitting whole packages together. He said they’d be pleased to look at any proposals we could make.”

“Nice,” said Fleur, leaning against him.

“Because I don’t see why we don’t broaden it a bit, get a team together, work out some ideas—”

“Mm,” said Fleur, half asleep, thinking of Jess and the imminent sale of Camera Shake, but deciding not to mention her. After all, Jess and Ben had ... Don’t think about it, she told herself. But she did.

They dozed. Again she felt that unease she had become conscious of feeling with Ben.

“Any more thoughts about Dickie?” he asked.

“No. I rang Grace in Portugal.”

“Why?”

“About what Val told me. She was evasive – not like her, really – but it looks as if they did have Dickie’s money all along. Still do, I think. She wouldn’t tell me.”

“That explains a lot,” he remarked.

“Not to me,” Fleur murmured.

“You might as well go for the money, then,” Ben said.

“Oh Ben. Can we stop talking about money?”

“Still, this Arnoldson thing is interesting.”

Fleur sank into sleep.

She woke very early next morning, bright light just beginning to come through the shutters. In the darkened room Ben was bent over his bag, packing and singing, beneath his breath, “What shall we do with the drunken sailor?”

“Oh,” she groaned. “St Lucia.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I’ll just be four days.” He looked up. “You don’t really mind, do you?”

“No,” she said, but she did.

He picked a big bundle of notes off the floor. “I forgot to tell you. When the Atlanta people decided to pay up I took it in cash. I wasn’t sure where I’d be next. Can you take care of it for me?”

“OK,” she said. Her eyes closed.

“In the top drawer,” he said.

When she woke again, he was gone. “Oh God,” she said to herself, “I’m ill.”

Later on Marie called the doctor who said it was possible she had a mild virus as well as sunstroke. “Travel and bugs go together, unfortunately,” he told her. “What you don’t get on the plane is waiting for you at the airport. You’ll be fine by Christmas Day.” Which was four days off now.

Seventeen

Early on Marie had tapped on the door of Sophia and Dickie Jethro's bedroom in the main house. In the big bed Dickie lay asleep with his wife's head on his shoulder. She woke first, saying, "What is it?"

"Mr Jones asks, would Sir Dickie meet him in the library straight away. He's had an urgent telephone call from London."

By now Dickie was awake. He said, "Tell him I'll come straight down." He turned to Sophia, his legs over the side of the bed. "Go back to sleep, little friend," he said in bad Greek to his wife. She smiled, watched him sleepily as he put on a dressing gown and closed her eyes again.

Jethro pounded downstairs, fully alert. In ten years Henry Jones had only woken him at night three times and the last time had been in October 1987, when the stock market crashed. He thought there was only one issue which could have turned itself into a crisis at this moment.

Henry, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, though he had given up smoking two years earlier, was waiting in the library.

"Christ! What is it, Henry? Tallinn?" Dickie asked.

"Yes," Henry said. "He's run for it. We don't know where he is."

"You mean they let him escape?"

Henry nodded. "Yes," he said crisply. "That's what they did. They want to know whether you, from your point of view, want him caught. They're prepared to take your view into consideration when they decide what course to pursue over his recapture. I think that may mean you have the final say. They don't want him, God knows. But the problem is, they don't know what he'll do next."

"Hah," said Jethro. "They're not alone in that. When did this happen?"

"I'm trying to establish that. Prothero didn't know – said they weren't clear – when I spoke to him."

"They don't want to say – thought they'd get him back without having to let on they'd lost him in the first place. What does that make it?"

"Two days ago, at least, I should think," said Henry.

“Christ,” Dickie said again. He sat down heavily. “Two days, maybe more. He could be anywhere.”

“They didn’t know who they were dealing with,” Henry said.

“I told them.”

“They didn’t believe you. I think what they want to know now is, do they go on looking for him or remove the watch at ports and airports and turn a blind eye to his escape?”

“Those feeble, feeble buggers,” said Dickie. “Tell them to find him. Do nothing, watch him – then I want to know where he is.”

“Will they tell you?” asked Henry Jones.

“They’d better,” his employer warned.

“With any luck he’s back where he came from,” Henry said.

“I doubt it,” said Jethro. “That’s why I can’t risk having him running around loose.”

“Are you still going to St Lucia?”

“I’ve got to, and so have you. Anything we decide to do we can do from the boat. But go we must. You’d better fax that fool Prothero. I want to talk to him.”

“OK,” said Henry Jones. He wondered how long the St Lucia trip would last.

Dickie Jethro, wearing shorts and sunglasses, lay in a deckchair on the top deck of his father-in-law’s boat as it cut through blue water under blue sky, big white birds wheeling overhead. Henry Jones, in a white shirt and trousers, sat beside him, smoking a cigar.

“There’s nothing more either of us can do, if she won’t take the money,” he said to his employer.

“I don’t want her going back to that flat, as she will do if she doesn’t accept. It’s worse now, with Tallinn loose and nowhere to run to,” Dickie said. He looked down to the prow of the boat, where Ben could be seen talking to Sophia and Zoe. “Lover boy doesn’t seem to have much influence over her. He wants the money badly enough, God knows. Show a leftie intellectual a wad of cash and he’ll fall on it like a starving man on a loaf of bread. But is he persuading Fleur? It doesn’t look like it. She’s obstinate, like her mother. They look quiet and reasonable, but at bottom they’re just bloody obstinate, go their own way. How do we give the situation a nudge?”

“I’ve told you what I think,” said Henry Jones.

Jethro thought. “Threaten to cut off the stipend from the old folks? Bang goes the country cottage with roses round the door and all that home-made bread. They have to start living on the proceeds of the old man’s carpentry. Someone, God forbid, might have to get a normal job ... I don’t want to do that. You know I don’t. Grace gave me Fleur, after all.”

“You may not have to. Once you threaten it, Fleur’ll take the money to save her poor old parents,” Henry said, drawing on his cigar.

“OK. Right after Christmas, you’ll call Grace and tell her what the deal is. And I’ll tell Fleur. Grace ought to put enough pressure on Fleur to get her to take the money. It should work. We haven’t got time now to fuck about. Fleur mustn’t go back to that flat.” He sighed. “God Almighty, Henry. Women and children, eh? Can’t live with them and can’t live without them. Meanwhile that little prick Ben has a bit more time to do his work. If he succeeds, I won’t need to threaten Grace. I’d be only too pleased if he never saw a penny of my money but he might still be the best way forward.”

A steward came up with a fax message and handed it to him. He read it and handed it to Henry Jones. “What I expected. Prothero on leave, my message forwarded to him. I expect he’s off skiing. Get on the phone and get his number, Henry. He’s not going to enjoy himself on my time and the taxpayers’ money, not after his recent cock-up.”

He looked up at the sky. “I can’t take this much longer, Henry. I’m fucked if I’m going to wander round St Lucia looking at the arts and crafts and meeting people I’m not interested in. Make arrangements to fly back as soon as we get there.”

“Sophia has plans to lunch with the Duchess. She’d prefer it if you were there.”

“They’ll manage. You come back with me, Henry. We’ve got to get hold of Prothero. This business is potentially nasty. My God,” said Dickie Jethro. “I tell you, Henry, I won’t be happy until I know where Tallinn is. And my daughter’s away from that flat.”

Eighteen

Fleur went through the day of the departure of the *Sea Queen Athena* feeling ill. She lay, limp and lethargic, drinking the soups and drinks brought her by Marie and taking the pills the doctor had prescribed. She tried to read and instead fell asleep a lot.

The following morning she woke feeling clear-headed and more ready to cope with life. Robin, she noted, had not rung her back to tell her about Grace's allowance from her father. She felt annoyed with them, and with Ben, too, because he'd left her alone at Braganza House. Admittedly she'd urged him to go, but he hadn't taken much urging. He could have insisted on staying with her. He must have thought it was a good idea to cultivate Jim Arnoldson with a view to raising money for their films. But what kind of a happy reunion was it, when one of the couple left only days after they'd come together again? She remembered him and Valentine Keith hovering round her sickbed talking about money, money, money. She thought of Dickie and Henry Jones and George Andriades and their endless daily business conferences. It was all men and money here, she thought, a Victorian world where the men dealt with big sums, the women were ornamental, made for man's comfort and the children were acquisitions, representing the future of the dynasty.

She jumped up and opened the drawer where Ben had left the money from Atlanta, which, in justice, really belonged to their creditors. Quite a sum, all in dollars. Half of it would get her back to Britain and pay her outstanding bills. If she took a bit more, the sum would keep her for a month while she completed her course, which she'd now be able to start on time. Ben would be furious, her father disappointed, Sophia and Zoe would think badly of her, but Fleur didn't care. Her mother, for reasons she hadn't understood at the time, had pushed her into this trip, even recruited Jess to help. Perhaps she'd been a fool to let her mother and her best friend persuade her to do something she'd instinctively felt to be a bad idea, but then, she thought, your mother and best friend were normally people you trusted to have your interests at heart. It was the money, she decided. It had twisted everyone's responses. She couldn't in honesty even tell herself Ben

was immune. You couldn't trust anybody, she thought, when big sums were floating about, enough to change people's lives and fulfil all their dreams. Look and learn, Fleur Stockley, she advised herself, and called the airport.

Flights which had brought in the holidaymakers were returning almost empty. There was no problem about getting a seat. She packed and parcelled up tips for the staff from Ben's store of money. She left a note for him saying, "Sorry – see you in London?" and a more apologetic letter to Zoe. Her final letter was to her father, rejecting his money and giving as a reason the excuse she'd already given him, that she wanted to make her own way in the world. She handed the tips and the letters to Marie, and got the chauffeur to take her to the airport.

In fact, as Dickie and Henry were landing, Fleur's plane was taking off for London.

She'd phoned Jess before she left Barbados and Jess was loyally at the airport to meet her with a car and an overcoat. Driving back in the grey and chilly gloom she said, "God, Fleur. Look at this dark and cold. What came over you?"

Fleur's story took them the best part of the way back to London. She had predicted Jess would denounce her and call her a fool but in the event she was surprisingly sympathetic. As they made their slow way through the Christmas traffic, she said, "It was badly handled, Fleur. It sounds as if they were trying to force a deal on you, you know, the kind of deal where it's a bit of a con, vital the other party signs up, and signs now, before they've had a chance to think it over. It's as if they were desperate – didn't you think it was weird?"

"Everything seemed weird at the time," Fleur told her. "I suppose I thought it was the way people like that operated. You know – get Fleur to take the money, construct the merger, buy an island somewhere. Everything done fast. Plus, if you had a pound for every time Dickie Jethro's been turned down when he tried to give somebody money you wouldn't have enough for the parking meter. No one in that world does."

"Mind you, though, Fleur. Your father's money would have solved some problems," Jess said ruefully.

"I'll have to solve them myself, then," she declared.

"Good," said Jess, in a tone lacking conviction. She went on, "I'll tell you something, though. I was right. Debs Smith has sold Camera Shake.

She's retained an interest – she hasn't said how much. But she did a classic boss thing, summoned all the staff to a meeting a few days ago and said, in essence, 'Christmas is coming up, the firm's sold and you're all out of a job. Have a merry one and a happy New Year as well.'

"Oh Jess," said Fleur sympathetically.

"It may not be too bad. She took me and Jane Ray aside and said, 'Don't despair.' She was trying to work something out for us with the new owners. She couldn't go into any details. Nothing was finalised."

"It might be all right then?"

"Might be," said Jess. "For me. Not for all of us, though. It's a hard world."

"If I'd played along with my father we might have been able to set up—"

"If you'd played along," Jess said bluntly, "Ben would have been part of the deal. In fact, because of your relationship, Ben would have been in charge. Somehow I don't think there'd have been room for me."

"Where are you going?" Fleur asked suddenly. They had passed the turn-off that would have taken them to Cray Hill.

"I suppose you left your inexpensive but thoughtfully selected gifts back in Barbados."

"I didn't like to bring them back," Fleur told her.

"You'd better nip down to Covent Garden tomorrow and get some more, because I'm taking you back to Highgate and tomorrow we, that's you, me and Adrian, are going off for Christmas Day chez Stadlen. I'm not dropping you off at that hovel you live in with only street people and junkies for company. You're expected to come with us and take part in the annual row about the Christmas tree. If it's Hanukkah we're celebrating, why the tree? If it's not Hanukkah but Christmas – why? The Stadlens are Jewish. Or are they? Or are some of them Jewish and others not? The tree's the focus of all this. Everyone's expected to contribute and make suggestions about it. If it's in the lounge it's too prominent for the older members of the family. If it's in the hall it manages to block two doorways. If it's upstairs the children feel estranged from their presents – or they have a go at them on the quiet. Last year it was on the back lawn with an extension cable run out for the lights. Then there was a fuss about it being dangerous to passing cats. One year one of my cousins, the Zionist, paid his little brother to fall on it accidentally on purpose. Your glamorous holiday's over, Fleur. You've

missed the Christmas dinner ferried in by teams of servants in the sunshine. Get back to reality and people throwing themselves at the Christmas tree.”

“Thanks, Jess – you’re an angel,” Fleur said. “They ought to put you on the tree.”

“Think there’ll be repercussions from your escape?” Jess asked. “Or will they just scratch you off the guest list and forget about you?”

“I’m worried about Ben’s reaction,” Fleur admitted.

“Yes,” was all Jess said.

“He might go back to the States. Particularly if Jim Arnoldson can put him in touch with some money.”

“Americans are a bit suspicious of handsome Englishmen with charm and Oxbridge degrees asking for money.”

“Ben has talent,” Fleur pointed out.

“Everybody’s got talent,” Jess told her.

Nineteen

My goodness gracious me, William. I've only been here a couple of days and already I'm getting used to it. I suppose that if I stayed here I'd see the old bloke with his dog on the beach every day until, suddenly, one of them wouldn't be there. Sad, eh? I'm almost tempted to take root here and see it through. No, reluctantly I'll have to leave for my villa in the sun. There's worse to come.

We went to Africa. It went off OK. The tyrant we were helping out got returned with acclamation and the army didn't try to kill him that time. Though one of his troops told one of ours that they were planning to do it next year. He wanted us to stay on and offered us a lot of money, to be paid from some development fund they were expecting to receive. I turned him down.

We returned towards the middle of January but I couldn't face home so I took a service flat in Bayswater and only dropped into Twickenham now and again. No one noticed except that the kids had to ring the office to make their insatiable demands, copying their mother's strategy.

I also cut down the old lady's pay. That's to say, I didn't, only she always overspent herself and came to me to bail her out. I decided I had to stop doing this. The marriage was so flaky you couldn't have held it together with cement. I didn't like it, but there it was. And the divorce wasn't going to keep her in the style she was accustomed to, so she might as well get used to it. I suspected she was squirreling money away herself, knowing what was coming.

However, this isn't what you're interested in. Now funnily enough I was in a pub in Bayswater not too long after we got back from Africa, having a drink with Goolies, when he told me a story.

Goolies started telling me about this man he knew, a retired SAS chap. Goolies' friend hailed from the East End criminal fraternity. When he left the army, he went back to his roots.

One day Goolies popped down to Poplar for a pint and the boy, Darren by name, told Goolies that his uncle, a man of standing in that part of the

world, had been approached, in the very pub they were sitting in, by an agent of the Crown, unsuccessfully disguised as a businessman.

The stranger revealed that he wanted Darren's uncle to arrange to eliminate somebody. The target was under guard at the Savoy Hotel but that was not a problem as the security had been persuaded to evaporate when asked to do so.

Uncle Roger saw no objection to taking on what seemed a fundamentally simple job, so he said he had an ex-SAS man on the payroll, who with other experienced men would be able to take care of his problem, as long as the money was right. They would plan it now and get it done by the end of the week, half the money up front, half on satisfactory completion.

It ought to have been all right, even Goolies said it ought to have been all right. Darren checked the entrances and exits of the hotel and looked over the security in general. As long as the protectors of the potential victim of Uncle Roger's nasty accident did what they were supposed to and went away when Darren and his boys turned up, nothing could really go wrong. It ought to have been all right.

Darren and the other two got the tube to the Strand at about seven thirty one evening, wearing suits and carrying sports bags like office workers off to the gym together. They went into the hotel and spoke to the receptionist who called upstairs and let them go up. This had been planned in advance.

So up they went. A large man opened the door to the suite. This led through a short, narrow hallway to a large room, all white and gold with flowers, fruit, a trolley still standing there with dishes and covers on it.

Sitting in an easy chair, smoking and apparently reading a book, was a tall, thin man in jeans, a collarless shirt and an expensive leather jacket. He was young, in his early twenties, with a very pale wide-cheekboned face – deadly pale – and big light blue eyes, slightly protuberant and almost colourless. His hair was so fair it was white and it hung down to his shoulders. "A good-looking guy," Darren had told Goolies, "and my first thought was 'rock star', but then I saw he was serious. A second later I realised he was trouble. That was when he looked at me and by then it was a split second too late." The guard who'd let the group in had promptly left through the open door and gone off down the corridor somewhere. The second guard, as soon as they'd entered the suite, disappeared through the door into a bedroom. "We were three against one," Darren had said, "and

we took him by surprise. Should have been all right. Should have been – wasn't."

One of them kicked the door shut. Darren produced his pistol. The other weapons were still in the sports bags. At that moment when it happened one man was in the hallway, bent over the bag with the guns in it, the other was a quarter turned, just having kicked shut the outer door, while Darren was standing just inside the sitting-room, pointing his gun at the target. The guy should have sat still, with a gun on him. Instead he came out of the chair as if propelled by a spring, bounded across the room in three long jumps, smashed Darren in the face with one hand and grabbed the gun with the other. He kicked the man just straightening up from the sports bag right in the crotch, which left only his third opponent, unarmed and startled, between him and the door. "He had a knife somewhere," Darren had reported. "He shouldn't have had – but he did. He swiped it right across my mate's face, cutting downwards. Geoff was yelling and blood was running down into his eyes. So this geezer just pushed him aside, hauled open the door and ran off down the corridor like a stag."

It had taken one minute, Darren said. "One minute from when the guard opened the door and we went in – a minute later Chaz is rolling on the floor in agony, Geoff's there with blood running down and I'm standing there without my shooter and a silly grin on my face. What a shocking exhibition."

Darren had gone straight to the door, looked out carefully and seen their so-called victim turning the corner leading to the staircase. No knife or gun was visible. He wouldn't pursue him publicly down the stairs and into a crowded lobby. He just shut the door and he and the others tried to sort themselves out, knowing the man they had come to kill was now sauntering through the foyer of the hotel and out into the Strand as if about to take a nice walk down to Covent Garden.

"They were outclassed," Goolies told me, stating the obvious. "Darren's face is still red. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he told me."

"Did Uncle Roger give the money back?" I asked.

"No, because he was never asked," Goolies said. "I'm presuming the plan was for the guards to come back after an interval, find the target dead and report they'd been overwhelmed by the opposition, who'd killed him and escaped. Of course, what they found was that the target had crippled Darren and his mates and escaped himself. I know Darren and I know he

wouldn't have taken idiots with him. This guy was very tough, very fast and very quick-thinking. From the minute they came in the room he had his moves planned. He was a champion, Darren said."

"Well, Darren would, wouldn't he?" I remarked. "So – who was this man they were sent to kill?"

"They'd never been told. And he didn't stop to introduce himself. Darren had him figured for a drug dealer turned informant, under police protection. The people in the pub all thought the hirer was official business. So why would the law try to rub him out, if he was co-operating?"

"We'll never know," Goolies added after a moment in a definite tone. And I agreed.

Except, William, that now I do know and it's a very nasty tangle indeed.

What happened next? You know some of it. During November rumours had started to circulate about the Russian. You know how it is in this village. The first stage is people putting little fragments of information together. Someone leaks something to a paper. There's a tiny paragraph. A denial. There's a piece in Private Eye, just mentioning the name. That's the point at which there may be no second stage. Or it goes on.

The quality of this whole affair, William, is its persistence. From the first moment of that so-called burglary at Gordon Mews the issue just kept on growing, dying down occasionally, making you think it had gone away, perhaps, but always returning, stronger than before, like a weed you keep on trying to eliminate but can never quite get rid of.

The facts behind the initial story were small and fairly uninteresting. By late December the German Customs and the German Foreign Office had been getting increasingly fed up with our Immigration Department, and our Home Office, because they'd approached them at the end of November with a perfectly valid request for the extradition of a man they believed to be a big-time Russian criminal, known as August Tallinn. The Germans had caught one of his couriers in Frankfurt smuggling a nasty cargo, plutonium.

The arrested courier, a woman, had named Tallinn as the boss behind the operation. The Germans had heard of him before but had never had any way of arresting him, still less getting enough evidence to bring him to trial. They were hungry for Tallinn. They also wanted to know, urgently, where the plutonium was going to and whether any other cargoes had gone that way before.

The courier said she didn't know. She was carrying a lead-lined suitcase weighing about ten kilos, half a kilo of which was refined plutonium. She was meant to hand the case over to a man at the airport who would identify himself to her using a code word.

Eight kilograms of plutonium containing ninety to ninety-five per cent plutonium 239 will produce a twenty-kiloton atomic bomb. So the captured courier's luggage contained a sixteenth of the material required to produce the bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945.

The creation of twenty-seven new democracies between 1985 and 1992 out of what was once the Soviet Union caused social chaos. The poor economic conditions following "liberalisation" caused a crime wave of disastrous proportions. Drugs from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan were routed through Bulgaria, into the former Yugoslavia and then on into the rest of Europe, until the war in Bosnia and sanctions against Serbia made the route difficult to use. Then two new ones were created, one through Greece and Albania to Italy, the second through Istanbul, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and the Czech and Slovak Republics into Germany.

The Germans knew Tallinn was bringing drugs into Germany and routing them on from there, but they'd never caught him, or anyone prepared to testify against him. Now they had what they wanted, a courier carrying highly dangerous illegal material ready to inform against him. Better than that, they knew where Tallinn was – in friendly Britain.

The woman had been carrying plutonium 239, refined uranium. The reactor required to process it costs millions of dollars to build and maintain and requires a staff of five to seventy-five engineers and 150 to 200 skilled technicians. It's reckoned there is around 200 tons of weapon-grade uranium in existence in the world, and half of this is in Russia, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

A small state may not be able to produce refined plutonium because of the cost and the technology it requires. What they can do is buy it from a source, if that source is willing to sell. With the Russian Federation and its people broke, desperate and in possession of half the refined plutonium in the world, there's the source – all that's needed is a guy like Tallinn to broker the deal and arrange transport through routes already open to him. Which is what, apparently, had happened. Only the destination and the identity of the customer were unknown.

Apparently the Manhattan Project physicist Luis Alvarez once said, “With modern weapon-grade uranium the background neutron rate is so low that terrorists, if they had such material, would have a good chance of setting off a high yield explosion simply by dropping one half of the material on to the other half.”

It makes you wonder, doesn't it, William, not whether it's going to happen, but why it hasn't already?

Someone was planning a low-technology effort. The shells would be eight to ten metres long, weigh about 1,000 pounds and be launched from mobile units no wider than a couple of buses side by side. The launchers could deliver a ten-kiloton explosion – smaller, but not much smaller than the Hiroshima bomb – anywhere within a range of 1,600 miles. The Pope could hit London from the Vatican with one of those shells if, God forbid, he chose to do so; the Canadians could strike into the centre of Manhattan from the shores of Lake Winnipeg. And, of course, another nightmare is the lone suicide bomber in a plane, dropping a bomb anywhere he chooses.

Tallinn had made that long-running Western government nightmare, the bomb falling into the hands of “irresponsible foreign governments” – Foreign Office speak for governments it doesn't trust, especially in the Middle East – come true.

The woman in German hands began to die of radiation sickness. Then she owned to having delivered other consignments of plutonium to Germany, over the Polish border, once by train to Berlin. At some point she'd come too close to a load with poor shielding. This news was depressing for the Germans partly because their case against Tallinn, when they got him to trial, would be harder to prove if the chief witness had died.

So the Germans had applied in late November for the man they knew was in British hands, stating they required him for questioning and possible arrest. They confidently expected the Brits to send them Tallinn. But they didn't. Instead, the Foreign Office retaliated with a letter stating that August Tallinn was in Britain claiming asylum on the grounds that if he returned to his native Russia he would be subject to persecution, imprisonment and possible death at the hands of his own government. Tallinn's reasons for suspecting he might meet an unjust fate in Russia were not given and the most ingenious minds couldn't work out what they were.

I got some sidelights on this when I had a pre-Christmas lunch with my Uncle Roderick at his club. There was another man there, a friend of my

uncle's, a correspondent for the Daily Telegraph. Over the meal he began to tell us, by way of a joke, about the matter of the extradition of a certain Russian crook, called Tallinn. This had been going on for almost a month by then. The Germans had requested his extradition. After the first reply from the Brits, claiming HMG was investigating the claims of this notorious drugs and arms salesman that he faced political persecution if he returned to his native land and that he had to stay in Britain until the decision was made, the Germans responded that he was wanted in Germany to answer charges concerning a very serious crime, smuggling nuclear materials. They asked for the grounds on which Tallinn considered he faced persecution in Russia. They also pointed out that if Tallinn was tried and convicted in Germany he would serve his sentence there, not in Russia. If the German authorities found no reason to try him, or if he were tried but found innocent, he would no doubt find it possible to return to Britain and renew his request for political asylum.

The Foreign Office riposted feebly that they were investigating Tallinn's case and would get in touch in due course. The Germans came back, more agitatedly. Their witness was ill, they needed to talk to Tallinn quickly. He'd been suspected for years of drugs and arms smuggling and they found the denial of their request hard to comprehend. They so nearly had him, said my uncle's friend. They must have been scared someone would get at the courier and persuade her to withdraw her accusations, or that she'd just die.

The reply from the Foreign Office said what they'd said before – they had Tallinn, they were looking into his claims, they'd address the German request when that matter had been settled. A hail of letters, telegrams, faxes and so forth began. My uncle's Telegraph pal told us that the FO's excuses got sillier and sillier and the German reaction chillier and chillier. They, no doubt, made a mental note not to help the Brits out if we ever asked them for anything similar.

Then the Brits did a silly thing. Sent a very uncivil note, the equivalent of a rude postcard saying, "Sorry, Krauts. Tallinn's run away. We can't find him, so you can't have him. Yah boo and who won the war anyway?"

The Germans just replied to this saying this development was very unfortunate. They trusted all measures were being taken to find Tallinn, whose status must surely now be that of an illegal immigrant. A warrant for his arrest now existed in Germany and they were consulting with Interpol

about discovering Tallinn's whereabouts. They wished their continuing interest in his welfare to be recorded by Great Britain.

The Germans, said the Telegraph man, must have been wondering if this latest claim concerning Tallinn, that he'd escaped and couldn't be found, was just a childish excuse to get out of returning him to Germany for trial. He added that no one could doubt that the Germans had acted properly and politely in asking for the perfectly legitimate extradition of the man and had been met first with obfuscation of a stupid sort and then with a discourteous communication saying Tallinn had fled. When, in all likelihood, the Germans took their revenge for all this, he told us, he'd be the last to blame them.

That was Christmas, as you'll note, William, and it was a few weeks later that Goolies told me the story of the attempt on the life of the man in the Savoy. I didn't put two and two together then, which shows I'm not always as clever as I think I am.

I was at my doctor's, a specialist on tropical diseases, waiting to get a little problem I'd developed in Africa sorted out, when I first saw the name August Tallinn in print. It was in a German newspaper, Die Welt, lying around for the benefit of the doctor's international clientele.

I could just make out the headlines – *Russian Criminal Tallinn Escapes After British Government Refuses Extradition*. There was a photograph, too, taken in what looked like a Moscow street. It showed a tall man in a fur hat, a long leather coat and boots, with a casual gunfighter air, talking to a squat and villainous-looking cove who was head-on to the camera. He had murder written all over a deeply pockmarked face. Tallinn, on the other hand, was young and tall, poised lightly and smiling at his associate co-conspirator, employed assassin or whatever he was, looking as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Insouciant" is the word that springs to mind. He had a long, attractive face and very fair hair, almost white, which fell below his fur hat almost to the shoulders of his coat. That was when it struck me this might be the man Darren had been sent to kill at the Savoy. The description fitted. The man had been under some kind of official protection in Britain. Attacked, he'd responded as only a man used to violence would have. And he'd escaped at the time when, my uncle's friend had said, the Foreign Office was telling the Germans they'd lost him.

Which made me wonder if the Brits were so keen not to hand Tallinn over to the Germans they'd decided to kill him. Which meant in turn the

matter was very serious because, no matter what they say, murder is still not the British Secret Service's first choice when it comes to solving difficulties, unlike others we could mention. There's always an Inner Policy Club, a group of some sort of illuminati, and they might go too far, too soon, but those aside, the spooks do try hard not to go around killing people all over the place. This isn't America, after all.

Abandoning the paper due to faulty German, another bit of reading material caught my eye. Lying on a table was Hello!, open at a double page spread of a lot of well-dressed people in Barbados. And there on a terrace with sun and sky as a background was the girl in the photograph Hoppo had brought back from the cemetery in Cray Hill, the very picture which had startled Mr Robinson so much. It was her. "Reunited for Christmas, Fleur Jethro and her father Sir Richard exchange news on the terrace of Braganza House, the Andriades' retreat in the West Indies."

Here was a girl who apparently lived on a council estate, and worked behind the bar of a pub in Cray Hill, on holiday in the Caribbean with an immensely wealthy father. Maybe she'd wanted to make her own way in the world, I thought. Or maybe there'd been a row and she'd been chucked out, thus the term "reunited". It was all a mystery, I thought, a mystery I would never solve. If only that had been true. I solved it all right, William, and it's put me into exile.

Twenty

Fleur returned to Adelaide House the day after Boxing Day, still toting her Barbados luggage after a riotous Christmas at the Stadlens'. A dozen of them had eaten and drunk themselves to a standstill several times and recovered with noisy games of cards, charades and board games. Fleur earned much appreciation when she intercepted Jess's ten-year-old nephew as he charged the tree like a berserker on Christmas Eve. It was never established who had paid the boy to try.

When Fleur checked her answer machine there were no messages. She'd half expected some reproaches from Barbados and a message from Ben telling her when he'd reach London. The absence of any word from Ben confirmed her suspicion that he wasn't coming, was angry with her for leaving and might have decided to stay and play with his new rich friends. Probably her taking half the Atlanta money hadn't cheered him up much. This was depressing, but she put the thought away and went straight over to the Findhorn Star to ask Patrick if she could have some shifts. As it turned out, he needed her.

"You're back early, aren't you?" he asked. "How was the holiday?"

"Hot," she told him.

He looked at her curiously, but said no more. He told her, "Two people came in asking for you before Christmas. One was a man and then there was a girl."

"Who were they?" she asked.

"They didn't say," he replied. "The girl left a Christmas card, but it got lost."

Fleur, suspecting they might be debt collectors who had caught up with Verity Productions, asked no more and began putting glasses in the washer. In some ways she didn't regret leaving Barbados and her father behind, but she was worried, very worried. If Ben wasn't going to come back to help her settle things she was in a tricky position.

Jess's father had advised her to go to the firm's old accountant and ask for help. He'd added, "Send the bill to me. I'll pay it and you can pay me

back when you can.” Touched by his offer, Fleur had agreed to see Gerry Sullivan as soon as possible, with or without Ben.

Since Patrick had now begun a new regime of producing pub meals Fleur worked an eight-hour shift at top speed, the Cray Hill residents evidently having decided that one more turkey meal was too many and descended in force for lasagnes and shepherd’s pies. During her half-hour break she phoned Gerry Sullivan’s office, which was closed, and left a message.

Next morning, as she was unpacking her bag, Dominic rang her doorbell and called out, “Will somebody open up in there, for God’s sake?”

She opened the door and found him there, looking fit and cheerful, with Jason beside him wagging his tail. “You look well,” she said. “So does Jason.”

He came straight in and embraced her. “I’ve missed you, you know. I wished all the time you were there. But aren’t you back a bit early? What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” she said.

“We’d better lie down while you tell me,” he declared.

He still smelt of the sea. It had been a rough crossing and he brought to her a land of country vigour; she heard waves crash, saw bare trees against a skyline, walked a lane, crunching with frost.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “Ah – that’s the stuff. That’s the business. Why did I miss you so much? More important – did you miss me?”

“What happened to you?”

“Oh – the family. Joe and me built a fence for my uncle. They’d killed a pig and a turkey. It was grand, being out there in the country. It wouldn’t do forever, mind.”

“Any girls?”

“They tried to marry me to my cousin. But I left the offer on the table, as you say in your world. What happened to you?”

She told him about the place, the arrival of Ben, the offer of money, her escape. “So I spent Christmas at Jess’s. Jess said I’d done the right thing by leaving. Surprise.”

“It looks like they were trying to give you everything you wanted, even a husband,” he said neutrally. She hadn’t told him she’d slept with Ben, he hadn’t asked, but they both knew she had and Dominic didn’t like it.

“I’m glad to be back in Cray Hill,” she said, “and I never thought I’d say that.”

He seemed to push aside the idea of Ben. “So why did you say no to all that?”

“I’ve told you – I didn’t want to be bought.”

“That’s not the whole thing, though, is it?” he said.

Lying there with Dominic, content and detached, she said, “No – it was too much, too soon. Two days after I arrived, suddenly there’s Ben, next day a big offer of money. I thought I was just being wet to be startled by all this, and scared. I thought somebody with a bit of gumption would have just grabbed it, made something of it. But even Jess said it was too quick. It’s like – they were desperate. My father was desperate. He must want a child who isn’t on drugs or isn’t living far away and won’t come back. Probably his only fault was trying too hard. He’s used to getting what he wants, when he wants it.”

“You’re probably right,” Dominic said, not convinced.

“To hell with them,” said Fleur.

“Including Ben?” he asked.

“I don’t know about Ben.”

“Tell me when you do.”

Fleur’s phone rang. She got up to answer it.

“Fleur – it’s Robin. I’m surprised you’re back already. We’re just back from Portugal. I’m sorry not to have rung from there, as promised. It was awkward. Of course, you’re owed an explanation. Grace and I were wondering whether you were free to come down here?”

Fleur was reluctant. She would have to go by train, which would cost more than she wanted; the weather was awful and she would, having got Patrick to give her a shift at the Findhorn, be obliged to let him down straight away.

She was explaining to Robin when she saw Dominic signalling from the bedroom door. She put her hand over the receiver. “Joe’s bought a van. I’ll run you down,” he said.

Fleur thought. In a van the journey would take less than two hours each way, even allowing for bad traffic. She could be back for an evening shift at the Findhorn. “Now?” she asked.

“Whenever.”

“OK.”

She told Robin she could get a lift from a friend and be in Kent by lunchtime at the latest.

They got dressed and got into Joe’s van, which still had Irish number plates and a basket of vegetables at the back.

“Didn’t know you could drive,” she said to Dominic on the way out of London.

“I learned on the farm as a boy,” he said. “Then in the city, well – taking and driving away was what it was called, legally.”

“Have you got a licence?”

“Is the Pope a Jew?” he asked charily, cutting up a taxi driver.

Fleur had a lift and, she now realised with relief, a witness to what was going to occur at Bucknells, which she felt oddly nervous about. So, telling herself she couldn’t have everything, she kept her fingers crossed on the journey, hoping there would be no point where Dominic got stopped and had to produce a driving licence.

Leading Dominic up the garden path at Bucknells, past the old yew, old lawn and the flower beds, now tidied and mulched, she could feel his cynical amusement at the picture of southern comfort he was seeing. She even turned, before she pressed the doorbell, to make sure he wasn’t grinning openly. He was not.

Grace opened the door, Fleur stepped in. “This is Dominic,” she said. “He’s a neighbour and he kindly gave me a lift down.”

“You’ve made good time,” Grace said. “Would you like some coffee?”

It was awkward, Fleur knew, having Dominic there when they were meant to be discussing family business – worse because it was family business connected with money, worse still perhaps because Dominic did not give the impression of having had the luxury of much family or money. Fleur didn’t care.

They sat in the sitting-room talking about the journey. Then Grace said, “Jess told me you left Barbados early.”

“I got ill,” Fleur said and then, realising this was nothing but a childish bid for her mother’s sympathy, added, “She must have told you why I left.”

Grace shook her head. “Really, Fleur,” she said in wild reproach.

Robin said, “Come out and see my workshop, Dominic,” and they left the room.

Fleur and her mother were now alone. “You tipped me into it, Mum,” Fleur said. “If you or Robin had called me back and told me how long you’d been getting my father’s money, and how much, I wouldn’t have felt so threatened.”

“Really, Fleur,” her mother said again, this time with some indignation. “Threatened? Who or what was threatening you?”

“I was in a strange place with people I didn’t know. I didn’t even have any fare back until Ben turned up. So I was trapped as far as I knew. Then an awful man who’s supposed to be a relative and keeps on making passes at me, though he’s married, came in when I had sunstroke and presented me with information about you and Robin receiving generous sums of money from this unknown father of mine – which I knew nothing about... What do you think I felt like?”

“I should have thought you might have felt rather privileged,” Grace said. “As it is, you must have upset your father very much, bolting away like that. What did Ben say?”

“He wasn’t there most of the time,” Fleur told her mother. “Didn’t Jess tell you? He’d gone on a cruise to St Lucia.”

“Oh – I don’t know,” Grace said. “I really thought this holiday would do you good.”

Fleur sighed. “You aren’t going to tell me about this money, are you?”

“I don’t think I need to go into all the details,” her mother said. “You know now that Richard assisted in your support. Naturally: you’re his child, he’s a wealthy man.”

Fleur gave up. She knew she was never going to learn from her mother the extent of Dickie Jethro’s financial contribution to all their lives. At any rate she was now about one hundred per cent certain he had never stopped the donations. Grace and her stepfather were Dickie Jethro’s pensioners.

Grace said, “Once I was pregnant my career as a dancer was over. Richard knew that. I didn’t want to explain all that to you. It might have implied you put a stop to my life as a dancer. How could I burden you with that?”

“I suppose so,” said Fleur. There was a grain of truth in what Grace said, and about a pound of omission.

Grace added, “Granny advised me very strongly to accept an allowance from Richard. That was what finally persuaded me.”

“It was the obvious thing to do,” Fleur said.

“I’m glad you see that, at last,” Grace said, an edge to her voice, “and – I won’t say any more about it after this – but I do think you should think about your father’s offer.”

“That’s really between him and me, now,” said Fleur.

“Exactly – that’s why I’ve said I’ll make no further comment. Why don’t you go out and see how your friend’s getting on with Robin? What a remarkably handsome young man, by the way. He’s your neighbour?”

“Yes. He’s Irish,” said Fleur.

“I’d gathered that. What about Ben, by the way?”

“He may come back to Britain to help clear up the mess – or not. I don’t know.”

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Grace.

“I’ll go and see how Dominic and Robin are getting along,” Fleur said.

In Robin’s workshop, large, well-windowed and kept warm by a fan heater, Dominic and Robin were bent over a vice. Robin was saying, “You just have to twist it, very gently, persuade it almost, to the left. Yes – that’s right. The trick is to get it in place fast.”

He quickly undid the vice, flashed a glue brush and, taking the bent strut, slotted both ends into the chair seat by his work bench.

“That’s a lovely shape of chair,” Dominic said. “Traditional. Classic.”

“Thank God someone still wants them,” Robin said. “In fact everyone does these days. There’s a shop in Guildford I supply. They can’t get enough of them. I’ve been thinking of getting a bigger workshop.”

“You couldn’t very well extend here,” Dominic said.

“I know,” Robin said. “It’s a problem. The other being that the vicar wants me to replace some of the carved choir stalls and if I’m pumping out chairs I won’t have the time.”

Fleur stepped outside to enjoy the familiar pleasures of the garden in winter, the dull green of grass, the skeletons of trees behind the wall at the back, tiny shoots of snowdrops just tipping through the black earth of the flowerbeds, waiting for the end of winter. She walked slowly back into the house.

Grace was in the kitchen, chopping cabbage for coleslaw. “They’re getting on well,” Fleur told her. “It’s the great fellowship of manual labour. They’ll be under the van soon, with wrenches, if no one stops them.”

“What does Dominic do?”

“He’s a builder. He’s working on a big block in the City.”

“There’s nothing wrong with honest labour,” Grace declared democratically. “Are you still starting that computer course?”

“On Monday,” she said.

“That’s one good thing about abandoning Barbados,” her mother said. “You can start the course on time.”

Fleur laughed. The argument about the money was over. All was well, at least for the time being.

In the van, going through Brixton, Dominic said, “Robin’s thinking of selling the house and putting the money into a small factory – big workshop type of thing.”

“Robin? Selling the house? I don’t believe it.”

“He thinks your father’s going to cut off the money,” Dominic said. “He didn’t say as much, but I’m as good as sure that’s what he meant. It may already have happened. That would mean he’s got to earn what they spend.”

“Oh Christ,” Fleur cried. “Do you think so?”

“Yes, I do. He doesn’t seem too happy.”

“Cutting them off – that’s just vindictive,” Fleur said.

“That’s what it takes to be a man like your father – brains, guts, initiative, energy, readiness to take a risk and a vindictive streak. I got the impression Robin might be relieved to give up the money.”

“People always surprise you,” said Fleur.

Twenty-One

So William, not for the first time Prothero sent for me. I thought I'd go and see what he had to say. Anyway, he had the drop on me over the Irish Farm business, so I had to be civil. He got some tea sent in on a tray, nice teapot and cups, plate of expensive bikkies.

Prothero, proffering the plate of biscuits, said, "We want you to look for someone."

"Can't you find him?" I cheekily asked.

"We don't want to find him officially. But unofficially we want to know where he is."

"I hope if I find him you won't want me to dispose of him," I said, laying out my attitude for inspection straight away.

He ignored this. "It's a sensitive matter," he said. "The man's name is August Tallinn."

Why wasn't I surprised? I said, "This is the Russian smuggler you've been protecting from extradition to Germany." I tactfully didn't mention Uncle Roger and the failed assassination attempt. Prothero, meanwhile, was looking at me carefully. I guessed if I found Tallinn Prothero would ask me to kill him, so I told him, "I'd rather not. I'm pretty busy. Can't your own men find him? Anyway, from what I've seen I doubt if he's still in Britain."

Prothero leaned forward and said, "We're getting a lot of pressure from Sinn Fein to examine the Irish Farm incident more closely. As you know they've never been happy that the investigation was in the hands of the army."

So we were back with that one. I realised I had to go along with him. So I put my hands up. "OK. Any fee involved?" I asked. He just looked at me.

He gave me an address in Finsbury Park where, according to a snitch they had inside Russian circles, Tallinn was supposed to be hiding out. For two nights and three days we watched the bloody flat, seeing a seemingly innocent couple going about their business.

I rang Prothero and told him that there seemed to be no sign of Tallinn where we were. He said to keep on observing. I put listening equipment in a

white van with a breakdown notice on the front and Scottie and I spent twenty-four hours in it listening to the refugee family getting up, eating, playing with the kids, leaving for work, arriving home, watching EastEnders, washing up, making love, going to sleep. If Tallinn was in there he had to be lying down saying nothing, not eating, drinking or going to the toilet.

Again I reported back to Prothero and told him I was ninety-five per cent certain Tallinn wasn't there in the flat. I told him I couldn't stay in Finsbury Park indefinitely. I had other jobs to do.

Prothero said, "Get in there and make sure."

Goolies and Kemal got themselves up as men from London Electricity, waited for Mr Mishkin to depart for another shift, banged on the door, held up their ID and marched straight in. The woman, a bit scared and with little English, didn't stop them while they went from room to room testing plugs and sockets, though she followed them anxiously, the nippers in train.

I went round to Prothero's riverside office and said bluntly, "He's not there. Why don't you just let him leave the country, if he hasn't already? If he doesn't want to be here, and you don't want him, let him go. Easy."

Something flickered in his eyes, a thought too deep for tears. It worried me. He said, "We'd regard that as a rather sloppy solution." If it had been the sort of solution they favoured, Prothero would have described it as "pragmatic". Obviously since it had been classified "sloppy" the option of letting Tallinn go was not recommended. They didn't want Tallinn running around unsupervised, wherever he was – Moscow, Rio or Miami. Or so I thought.

I told him, "There's no point in me doing things you can do better yourself. If you really want Tallinn, use the police. Claim he's done an armed robbery somewhere, circulate his picture and hope the cops can bring him in."

Prothero was too pissed off to reply. I saw he wasn't really pissed off with me apart from the fact that I was there. Something about the situation annoyed him. He knew if Tallinn wasn't in Finsbury Park, and perhaps never had been, he couldn't find him without another tip-off, unless he instigated a police search, which obviously he didn't want to do. Why not? Presumably because the police couldn't be relied on to keep the matter under wraps. Someone might recognise Tallinn from the picture circulated,

someone might talk, the press might get hold of the story. Prothero didn't want any publicity about Tallinn. I suspected this wasn't only because they'd been incompetent and let him escape, but perhaps, just maybe, Tallinn had a tale to tell, knew something Prothero or his masters wanted to keep secret. Which would explain the British reluctance to hand him over to the Germans. And why, when it became embarrassing to go on protecting him, they – perfidious Albion as usual – decided to bump him off. But Tallinn, who'd grown up in a hard school, had anticipated this. Now he was running around like a loose dog they couldn't find and didn't want anybody else to find, and poor old Prothero was going to get the blame. Oh dear.

We're in January here, William. The hysteria about the Iranian nuclear weapons was mounting as it became more and more obvious that they had a possible twenty-five mobile launchers, and missiles to match. From the early nineties it had been known that some countries – Israel, Saudi Arabia and India – had been working on low-technology systems like this. The Israelis had Jericho II with a range of 1,000 miles, a real threat to the neighbours, and the Russians have been helping out the Iraqis a lot, they say. On the basis that my enemy's enemy is my friend, I suppose. They say the Cold War's over, don't they, William? But you and I don't really believe that, do we?

The Western powers and the USA were in the position of householders waking from a recurrent dream that there was a burglar under the bed, realising with relief that "it was all a dream" and then finding the burglar there after all. But while terrifying it was also, when you come to think if it, inevitable. That awful thing had happened – the balance of power in the Middle East had been upset. This was the balance of power as seen by Western eyes, naturally.

Leader writers searched the lexicon of gloom and doom. Armageddon loomed, as did the Final Jihad and the death of the planet. The Sun recommended a Fifth Crusade and sixty-five per cent of Sun readers voted for it. Accusations and rebuttals ran to and fro as is natural in situations where everyone's shit scared and no one knows what to do. In the end, as usual, a culprit was found. It's easier to blame one individual than work out all the different factors involved. In this case the villain responsible was August Tallinn.

By now the British line was that they were making all efforts to find Tallinn but they were practically certain he'd left the country. They

reminded Germany that since Tallinn had never been formally charged with anything, let alone tried and found guilty, he was technically an innocent man. You can imagine how happy the Germans felt about that one, knowing that they would by that time have had Tallinn convicted and in jail for the rest of his life, if only the Brits had handed him over when asked to do so.

There'd been good news – the announced successful merger between a US bank and the investment bank of Strauss Jethro Smith, masterminded by the successful British banker, Sir Richard Jethro. Much was made of Sir Richard, of his initiative and entrepreneurial skills, of his humble origins, of the almost miraculous stability of his bank. And he'd come from an ordinary family and worked his way up in banking in the days when there was a thick glass ceiling preventing the progress of those who didn't come from the right family and had not attended the right schools.

He was also suggested as chairman to the hastily assembled but potentially very important Government Economic Council. It was tough that just as Jethro was accepting the chairmanship of the Council – he had no good reason to refuse the Prime Minister's personal request – he was trying to sort out the mess he was in. Achilles had his heel and Dickie Jethro had August Tallinn. Oh dear.

Twenty-Two

Towards the end of January, in the penultimate week of her computer course, with no word from the Jethros or Ben, Fleur took the afternoon off to see Gerry Sullivan, Verity's old accountant, in Soho. She told the gnomelike little man: "I've got to do something to straighten things out. Ben might come back, or he might not. In the meanwhile I'm getting three or four letters a day from creditors or their lawyers, tax, VAT – everything."

He looked at her, puzzled. "I wouldn't have thought you had too many problems now."

"I have," she said, puzzled. "What makes you think I haven't?"

"I'll give you the name of a firm which will deal with all this. They're good. Go to them as soon as you can."

"Is there a fee?" she asked.

"They won't work for nothing," he said, "but you'll be able to manage that, I suppose."

Fleur believed Gerry Sullivan thought she was in touch with Ben, who was funding her in some way. This was discouraging because it made her think Ben had some cash he wasn't prepared to let her have in order to pay off debts. She said to Gerry, "I'll go and talk to them." She felt awkward about asking, but said, "Is there any news of Ben, by the way?"

He seemed surprised she didn't know and said uneasily, "He's in California, I believe, working on a project."

"That's nice," she said bitterly. "Next time you're in touch tell him I'm still bogged down in our debts, will you?"

She said goodbye to a still frowning Gerry and left. Fuming, she went round the corner for a coffee with Jess. "God, I felt a fool. It's obvious Gerry's in touch with Ben and at first he thought Ben was sending me money. When I had to ask for news of him he was amazed and I felt like a woman turning up with two kids to ask for money because her husband's run away. And he played that man-game with me, support the bloke against the pursuing harriidan. It just destroys your faith in human nature. Do you know where Ben is?"

“No, and nor do you,” Jess said calmly. “If you can stop ranting I’ll tell you what’s going on at Camera Shake.”

“Oh God, Jess. With what I’m facing—”

“Shut up,” Jess said earnestly. “This is important. Debs has sold up, like I told you, but she still owns twenty-five per cent of the firm and she’s staying on as head of a small production company inside Camera Shake, which aims to make one, maybe two movies a year – big, full-length, British-style movies – which means getting scripts, raising money, putting packages together. It’s a big deal, Fleur, if it works. She told me this morning I’m going to be her deputy, which, since she plans to spend more time with her family, puts me virtually in charge. There’ll be two senior production assistants, Jane Ray – and you. Which means a big salary, car, expense account, the lot. Camera Shake’s covering the first year’s salaries, then the unit would have to be self-financing. Is this your lucky day, or what?” She sank back in her chair, grinning.

“Thanks, Jess,” said Fleur, stunned.

“Debs wanted you,” Jess told her. “She said she knew about you. I said I was seeing you later and she said she wouldn’t mind an answer now. She wants to get going straight away, knowing we’ve only got one year supported by Camera Shake. Shall I phone her and tell her you said yes?”

“What do you think?” Fleur said.

So Jess phoned and Debs Smith said she was on her way home but if they could get to the office within five minutes she’d still be there. Jess and Fleur picked up their handbags and fled.

They sat round a table in Debs’ smart office. Debs, small, dark and whippet-thin, said briskly, “Welcome aboard, Fleur. It’s new territory. None of us has ever done it before. We need to find a basic twenty scripts, for starters, and we need to have done it yesterday. Initially it’s just a case of weeding through everything the agents and some hand-picked writers send us. If you agree, Fleur, we’ll give your job six months, shall we? Then we’ll review progress.”

“Thanks. I agree,” said Fleur.

“OK,” said Debs, standing up and picking up her coat and bag which were on a chair close to her desk. “See Sandy about terms and conditions today,” she added. “Meeting’s first thing on Monday morning.” She went to the door and turned. “The priority is a name. Camera Shake’s going on as

before. We need a new title. Nothing stupid. All the ideas up to now make us sound like a rock group. Jess," she said, "it's got to be settled early next week. We can't operate without a name." And she was gone.

Fleur and Jess sat on in the office, staring at each other speculatively. "Could be fun," said Fleur. "Big fun."

"Big, scary fun," said Jess. "It's a fact you'll be out in six months if it doesn't work and I'll be out in a year." She picked up the phone. "Sandy," she said, "it's Jess. We have the new person for the new unit. Fleur Jethro – same contract as Jane. We need it Monday morning at the latest."

"Stockley," said Fleur loudly. "Fleur Stockley."

Jess made a shut-up movement with her hand. Fleur subsided. She knew Jess could gauge fame, reputation, influence to a hair's breadth. And that this was a business which depended as much on these vibrations as a garage does on petrol, oil and spare parts. She decided that if Jess said she had to be Jethro, Jethro was what she'd be, at least for the time being. At least till the contract was signed. She leaned back in the leather seat and breathed deeply, taking in her good fortune.

Jess fished in a silver box on Debs' desk and came up with a couple of thin cheroots. With the sneaky feeling they were smoking in the headmaster's office, they both lit up.

"They'll have to find us some space here," Jess said dreamily. "And a budget for fixtures and fittings. I think I'll have some French chintzes and a regular order for flowers – simple, cottage-style ones. It'll strike a fresh note. Flowers, couches, some nice little pictures—"

"There'll be a battle to get even a cupboard out of Camera Shake," Fleur said. "And Debs isn't going to give all this up." She thought of the course and said, "I told them I'd be back by four."

"Ring and say you can't make it. Sandy's bringing the contract up later. You'd better sign this afternoon."

They passed the time inventing titles for the new unit, then searched Debs' office for information about the size of the budget. They found she had put a lot of information on the computer guarded by a password.

"Let's just ask her on Monday," Fleur suggested. She was beginning to feel the reality of the situation. "We might as well start calling agents and writers. We haven't got any time to spare. We'll just call ourselves Camera Shake."

They spent an hour and a half on the phone. Debs' fax started pushing out messages. When they took a break Jess said, "It goes to show that when you grasp the nettle everything else falls into your hands. You know what I mean – the minute you started that computer course and decided to face up to the debts there you were with a job. On the other hand," she added, "it also goes to show a little publicity never hurt anybody."

"What publicity?" Fleur asked.

"This job – Debs had seen that spread in *Hello!*, so when your name came up she thought of that."

"Oh God," said Fleur. "Is that out?" The flight from Barbados had wiped out all memory of the photographs taken there by the magazine.

"Didn't you know? You're on the front cover looking chummy with your father. It's a very good photo of you."

"I'm going out to get it," declared Fleur, standing up. "It's embarrassing, considering what happened later."

"Just another version of the curse of *Hello!*" Jess observed. "You get photographed with your loving husband and a month later there's a divorce. You're photographed cosying up to all the Jethros and minutes later you're at the airport with your suitcase."

Standing in her overcoat in a narrow, wind-swept street, Fleur looked down at the cover of the magazine she was buying from a street vendor. She remembered standing on the terrace with her father. Waiting for her change she flipped through – there she was alone, there with Bobby and there were all the others in various poses: Sophia and Zoe and George in the drawing-room, Bobby and her father by the fireplace, smiling at each other. "A happy reunion for the Jethros makes Christmas a very special time."

"'Not just a daughter but such an attractive one,' says Sir Richard," another caption read. She took her change and ducked back to Camera Shake, head down, as if she thought she would be pointed out in the street. The article certainly explained why Gerry Sullivan imagined she had no financial problems.

Back in the office Jess was on the phone and the fax was spewing out more paper. "Can you believe it, some daft girl at Combined Artists is sending a whole script through, page by page ... Jennifer!" she shouted into the phone. "Stop sending that script through. Put it on a bike, darling. You're blocking my fucking fax machine." Her mobile rang and she

grabbed it. "Hullo Charlie," she said. "How's it coming? Glad to hear it. Yes, we're in business here. What have you got?" As she listened she said to Fleur, "We're going to the Groucho later to meet Sidney Spender and a man from an investment bank who specialises in film finance, David Parker. Adrian may come along. I don't think you need to invite your boyfriend, the one with the dog on a rope."

"Why not?" said Fleur.

"Because street cred is out, and I don't suppose any of the people at the Groucho are short of a dealer," Jess told her. Into the phone she said, "Thanks, Charlie. Looking forward to it."

Several large jiffy bags containing scripts were brought in and put on the desk. The phone kept ringing. Jess made outgoing calls on her mobile while Fleur was on the office phone, speaking to writers whose agents had rung them, agents who had just spoken to writers, writers who had been passed the word by other writers, an actor's agent, a director and an actress who had bought the rights to a book she wanted to film. The desk was covered in scribbled notes. There was a second delivery of scripts and Sandy came in with Fleur's contract.

"The only people not ringing are investors," said Fleur.

"Funny, that," Jess replied.

At six Fleur switched on the answering machine, they split the scripts into two big piles and, each carrying a bag, went to the Groucho Club.

Fleur noted her new popularity. Recognisable through *Hello!* magazine to people she didn't know, and quickly identified on the grapevine as part of a new production team set up to find and finance major films, she was constantly approached with greetings, ideas and even invitations.

The to-ing and fro-ing ended when they left the bar and sat down to eat with Sidney Spender, a very powerful film agent, and the investment banker, David Parker. At that point everyone in the restaurant knew that their group was there, but was aware they could not be approached.

The men were calm, serious and careful. David Parker would be advised what projects to invest in by the man he trusted, Sidney Spender. Fleur questioned, "If I asked you both what kind of film you thought would bring big profits over the next four years, what would you say?"

"Good script, exciting plot, big stars," said David Parker. "But in this country we have a problem with big movies. There's no tradition, no large

funding. But because essentially there is no British film business, there are no native business rules to follow. It's a cliché, but if you want to succeed you ought to look for quality, though that's harder to judge and certainly harder to finance than *Star Wars*."

"Low budget, then?" Jess asked.

"That would be my advice," he repeated. Then, saying he had to get home, he stood up and said goodbye.

Sidney Spender stayed on for another brandy and said, "Well, girls. I think he liked you. He's backed films, he's made money and he's prepared to do more, cautiously. Now what I'm going to do is send you a script by a young writer who's done a certain amount of TV work. It's crime thriller, *noir*, with a very unusual twist – a man comes out of prison after serving a life sentence for killing his brother. He didn't do it, or we think he didn't, we're not sure, so he goes looking for his brother's wife, who could have committed the crime. They fall in love." He outlined the rest of the story, which to Fleur seemed sensational, slack and improbable.

After he left Jess looked at Fleur and made a face. "If that's the best Spender's got we're in trouble," she said.

"He's holding out on us," Fleur said. "We're untried and unconvincing." She yawned and added, "I must go. It takes an hour to Cray Hill, at least."

Jess said to her, "You've got to move to somewhere more central. You can't stay there."

When Fleur got back to Adelaide House, borne up by the excitement of her new job, there were two messages on her machine. Ben said, "Darling – coming into Heathrow at three p.m. tomorrow. Meet me." He added, "Big news. Looking forward to seeing you—"

The second message, from Dominic, sounded grave. "Fleur. I'm in the pub with Joe. Something funny's happened. Can you come over tonight, any time? Important."

Fleur was shocked. Ben was coming back and she didn't know where that would leave her and Dominic. Would Ben want to stay with her? She realised suddenly that she linked Ben with his wanting something – a deal, a night out somewhere, a meeting with someone, calls made, letters sent out. She'd got used to following this effortful agenda, scurrying to keep up, like a person walking with someone who had longer legs. And she was worried by Dominic's message. He sounded alarmed, which was, with

Dominic, unusual. She thought she might as well go to meet him, find out what it was all about and casually mention Ben was coming to London. He'd have to know sooner or later.

When she got to the pub Dominic, Joe, Ellen Whitcombe and Joe's new girlfriend Melanie were sitting together in a group at a table by the windows.

"Can't stay away, can you?" Patrick called to her from behind the bar.

She joined the others. They were all looking at her in a strange way, as if they were curious, even puzzled about her. She sat down. Joe went off and got her a tomato juice. Ellen went on staring at her and Melanie was plainly anxious.

Fleur asked Dominic, "Is something the matter? What's going on?"

"Not exactly," he said. Joe came back bearing the drink. She noticed the others were drinking whisky. This alarmed her, also.

Dominic told her, "Melanie got this magazine, *Hello!*"

"Seems everybody does," Fleur replied. "Look – I was persuaded into it. And anyway, it's not a crime."

"That's not it," he said. "It's your father, Richard Jethro. Joe and me recognised him." He was speaking earnestly and there was anger in his voice.

"What do you mean? Recognised him from where?" she asked.

Ellen, opposite her at the table, was now looking very distressed.

"What's he done?" Fleur asked.

"It was about five years ago," said Dominic. "A long story. Not very nice. Vanessa wasn't even sixteen then. I was twenty-one, Joe was twenty. I came down from Liverpool because there wasn't any work and found there wasn't any here, either. Joe'd been in and out of hostels and short-stay places and squats since he'd got out of the children's home. We were all on the street. We got together in a short-stay place we were in, got friendly. We were a team, the three musketeers. We did what we had to do, boosting from shops, a bit of dealing – and the rest. There's always opportunities to sell what you've got. There was a lot of stuff we didn't do, though," he said carefully, looking at Ellen. "Joe and me were trying to watch out for Vanessa, but by that time she was getting to be a full-time addict. We were trying to keep her off the game because obviously that's the easiest way for a girl to get money for drugs. Boys too." He was still talking to Ellen. "You

know all this. Then you two started speaking again and there was a chance Van would go into a programme. She was talking about it. It was a critical moment for her, I still think that. And that was where your father came in,” he said to Fleur.

Fleur’s heart was in her boots. She looked at Ellen’s face, so drawn and sad, Melanie’s questioning stare, Joe’s face revealing nothing, carved from stone.

“We were going along one Sunday night,” Dominic said. “We had no money and nowhere to go. It was autumn, cold and rainy. About nine at night, dark and we were heading towards Holborn to find somewhere to bed down. We hadn’t got much to look forward to: a frosty night, an early wake-up and no cash – not even for a cup of tea. Vanessa was saying she wanted to pick up a punter and get something and we were arguing with her. She wasn’t experienced at that sort of thing,” he told Ellen. “I’ve got to say she’d tried it once or twice, but it had put her off. But broke is broke and she needed a fix just to tide her over. I’m telling the truth,” he assured Ellen. “She wanted to get better. This particular night was more of a blip and we all knew if we could get over it everything would be better next day. Sunday’s a bad day in that life, that’s a fact.

“We were mooching along somewhere in the West End, arguing about what to do. A long broad street, very quiet, houses and posh hotels. Then suddenly coming up behind us was a big black limousine, chauffeur in front and a guy leaning out of a half-open door as it travelled along, waving a big wad of cash at us and shouting, ‘Girl – do you want some money?’ and stuff like that. He hardly spoke English. He had a Russian accent, or something similar. Scary bloke. He had a black coat on. He was tall, very young, with long fair hair – white really – and very pale blue eyes. The car came right beside us, crawling forward, him leaning out the door, waving the money. I didn’t like the look of him. He looked dangerous. He looked like a person who lived by violence, one of those people who you’d be talking to one minute and the next he’d be trying to kill you. There was another man, sitting next to him while he was leaning out of the door, a man in a business suit, looked English and he was frowning. He didn’t like what the other guy was doing but he wasn’t trying to stop him.

“We kept on walking. Joe got hold of one of Vanessa’s arms, I grabbed the other and the car just kept moving beside us. He was still leaning out of

the open door, going, 'Come on – much money for a fuck – you want it. Come on boys, let your sister go.'

"Vanessa kept looking at him, at the money, and the other man started talking. He said, 'Leave her, leave her. I'll get you a girl if you want one,' but the tall man kept on at Vanessa, waving the money at her. 'You want this? You want this?'

"We were trying to hold her back but suddenly she shouted, 'Leave me alone. You're not my keepers.' She wrenched away, went across the pavement and grabbed at the cash in the man's hand. Quick as a flash he whipped the hand with the money in it back, reached out with the other arm and dragged her into the car. He was very fast, very good reactions. I hadn't expected it," said Dominic. He told them, "I ran towards the car but the driver had sped up. He shot up the street, then round a corner. Joe and I took off, running up the street after the car. It was a rich, respectable street, all porticoes and brass plates on doors, and it was deserted. And Joe and I were running after this limousine, yelling.

"We ran round the corner into the mews and there was Vanessa, now tugging away from the guy. She'd changed her mind, probably, after he hauled her in the car, got scared. But he was pulling her into one of the small houses there and the other bloke was behind them, trying to say something but still shaking his head and following on. You could see everything clearly because there was one of those small Victorian-style street lamps right outside the house. Joe and me yelled and ran towards them. The older man saw us and then it looked as if the tall guy pushed a load of money into Vanessa's hand. She seemed to sag and stop resisting and in they went, the other guy following on. And the door slammed."

Dominic paused, sighed, then seemed to force himself to go on speaking. "Joe and me were stuck outside. So was the chauffeur in the big black car. He gave us one look, started up and drove down the mews and out the other end, going off somewhere to garage the car. He wasn't going to interfere. So there was Joe and me in this little mews, all little trees outside the doors and window boxes, and inside one of the houses, there was Vanessa. We stood there like idiots," said Dominic.

Joe said to Ellen, "We couldn't do nothing. Van was our mate, but we weren't her babysitters. She'd gone off of her own free will. OK, we knew free will wasn't one of those ideas that goes with being a junkie. But she done it deliberately." He looked helplessly at Ellen. "I know what you're

thinking. We should have banged on the door and yelled. The residents would have called the cops on us and then maybe, just maybe, Vanessa would have got rescued. Or maybe the police would have looked at us, street people, no address, no job, no nothing and arrested us instead.”

Dominic continued, “We were so angry and frustrated and fucking helpless to do anything. You don’t know what it’s like to be on the street. You can keep yourself together, just about. If you’re lucky. But everybody’s against you, especially the law. We couldn’t get in there. It was all bolts and bars and burglar alarms. We didn’t believe the cops would help us. And I was angry with Van for going off like that. After all we’d said – I was to blame, Ellen. I’m sorry, I got it wrong. I was all for pissing off and leaving her to it, that’s the truth. I said to Joe, OK, if that’s what she wants to do, let her do it. We’d been so careful of her, so nice. We’d nicked for her. We’d given her stuff and supported her every way we knew, then some rich crook comes along and waves a roll of cash at her and it all goes out the window. It was Joe who said we might as well stick around, we didn’t have anything else to do so we should stay in case anything went wrong.

“We found a doorway across from the door Van had gone into. That house was dark. We thought there was nobody in. We settled down there and waited. The windows of the house opposite the one where Van was were shuttered up, but you could see lights through the cracks. You couldn’t hear anything from inside the house, though. At first. Then we heard this muffled screaming – that was about ten minutes later. We jumped up. We were halfway across the mews when the door was flung open and there was Vanessa in front of the tall guy, no coat, clothes all torn, blood running down her face. The tall guy was behind her, his face all twisted, shouting. He had her in an armlock, about to throw her in the street. Behind them was the other bloke, shouting something.

“The man with Vanessa walked her right out of the door, so we could see the man behind, plain as you are now, Fleur. And it was your father. We didn’t know who he was until we saw him in that magazine. But it was him.”

Fleur gazed at him. “What did you do?” she asked hopelessly.

“The tall guy dropped Van on the ground, shouted something at us, some insult, and then went back inside and shut the door. We picked Vanessa up. She was a mess. Whoever’d done it had punched her in the face, over and over. When we got her to hospital she had cracked ribs, as well, and a

sprained wrist. The bugger had actually pulled her round the room by her hair. There was a big clump missing, just bleeding scalp underneath. He'd raped her, too. That was no surprise.

"After we took her to hospital she never said anything for two days. When she did, she said the minute they got into the house he'd grabbed her shoulder and her hair and hauled her upstairs, torn at her clothes, hung on to her hair while he punched and beat her, then thrown her down on the bed. The door'd opened then, while he was on top of her, and your dad had come in and said something like, 'Leave her alone. Do you want to get us all into trouble?' Sensitive guy, eh?" he said to Fleur. "All heart. He called the man mad and the guy turned on him and yelled something in what sounded like Russian and your daddy, Fleur, turned right round and went out of the room. Whereupon the tall guy got on with raping Vanessa, then went back to clouting her again. She said she rolled off the bed and lay on the floor and started screaming. She didn't know where she was or what was happening by that stage. It had all happened too fast, but she just kept on yelling and yelling until, seemingly, the man dragged her to her feet and started hauling her down the stairs. She was knocking from side to side.

"Your father came to the door and started shouting, 'Get her out of here. Get her out.' At the foot of the stairs he pushed money into her hands. When we picked her up she had three hundred pounds in her fist. He must have emptied his wallet. Nice, eh? Get her out, never mind how badly hurt she is, then throw money at her.

"We went back there that night, after Vanessa was in the hospital and we'd called Ellen, but the house was empty – they'd cleared off. We went back every day for a few weeks, but it was obvious the place was empty. Then the For Sale board went up. They didn't want us to find them, or the police. Not that we reported it – Vanessa wouldn't have it."

"I've been dreaming about catching those two and giving them a just reward for what they did," said Joe. "Now we've found one and he's your father. He'd know the man who did it, wouldn't he?" he asked her.

"If it's him, yes," said Fleur. "But even if it is, I've walked away from my father and I don't think if I went to him he'd give me the name and address of this Russian, or whatever he was. Why would he, when all he was bothered about at the time was keeping everything quiet? I'm sorry, Joe. I can't see a way of doing this." It sounded weak, but it was the truth.

“What good would it do, anyway?” Ellen asked. “Beating up that man, killing him, wouldn’t make any difference to Vanessa, or me.”

“She’s right, Joe,” Melanie said.

“It might help me,” said Joe.

“Couldn’t that just be your guilt?” said Melanie.

Joe looked at her. “I never wanted to go out with an old, wise woman. It doesn’t matter what I feel. He’s guilty, that bloke, and I want to get him.”

“After it was all over the police started looking for you all, when you hadn’t done anything – that’s right, isn’t it?” Melanie asked.

“Yes,” Dominic told Fleur. “A week later suddenly the cops were asking round about Joe and Vanessa and me. Somebody got it out of them it was about a burglary in the West End. Which we hadn’t done. But that might not have made any difference if they’d caught us – and anyway, none of us was squeaky clean. So we just disappeared. Vanessa went to her auntie in Wales and Joe and me worked hard and got our fares for a business trip to Barcelona. And stayed away for six months and then got together again in London. Only this time we were careful. We had enough cash from Barcelona to fix ourselves up with new ID. It was only when Vanessa got the flat and we decided to join the mainstream that we made a bonfire of our fake IDs and surfaced again.”

“You told me I was paranoid when I thought Vanessa was killed,” Joe interrupted.

“You were,” Dominic said.

“So – Mel says there was a man photographing us at Vanessa’s funeral,” Joe told him.

“What?” Dominic said. “What are you talking about?”

“He was,” said Melanie. “He was right over the other side of the cemetery, but he was pointing the camera at us.”

“You must have good eyesight,” Dominic said disbelievingly.

“I have, as a matter of fact,” she told him.

“She has,” Joe confirmed.

“Probably a bird watcher,” Dominic said.

Fleur was dazed and upset. She had to admit that from what she knew of her father he could have been involved in the affair at the mews house in exactly the way Joe and Dominic had described. He might have tried to stop Vanessa’s assailant, but if his own interests were likely to be affected, not

determinedly enough. His aim, once the damage was done, would have been to get the thing over as quickly and quietly as possible. There was no proof he was the man Joe and Dominic were accusing. But he could have been.

She barely listened to the rest of the conversation, about the police enquiries and the photographs taken in the graveyard. All three of them, she thought, Joe, Dominic and Vanessa, had been involved in petty crime, dealing small quantities of drugs, shoplifting, using stolen credit cards. You didn't have to be a genius to work out what Joe and Dominic had been doing in Barcelona.

They hadn't all been forced to live like that. Vanessa could've gone home at any time. Perhaps Dominic could have gone back to Ireland where his family would have taken him in. Only Joe would have had nobody to turn to. Instead they'd taken to the streets. Vanessa had become a heavy drug user. The other two were thieves. Vanessa had taken a step too far, got into a car when money was held out to her and when the customer turned out to be a sadist. Dominic and Joe had been too scared to call on the only people who could, at that point, have protected her – the police. They'd all fucked up.

Terribly depressed, she realised she was turning against Dominic and Joe – Vanessa, too. All right, she thought, she was probably criticising the three because Dominic and Joe were implicating her father in a crime. But what was she doing here listening to his sordid story which had ended in a death, not to mention the conspiracy theories surrounding it? It took her too close to a frightening, out-of-control world she wanted nothing to do with. She felt sick and scared, and said what was on her mind. "What a bloody mess. Vanessa raped and beaten, then dead. You two make a pig's ear of the whole thing and now you're working on some conspiracy theory. And my father, or somebody pretty much like him, colluded and there'll never be any accounting. Never be any justice." She stood up. "I'm sorry. I'm going home."

She went back to her flat on her own. She went straight to bed, but her head was whirling. She couldn't sleep. Ben was arriving tomorrow. How could she take another afternoon off the course to go and meet him? They'd chuck her out. She must complete it. The Camera Shake contract was for six months only. If the production company didn't work out she'd be back looking for another job in the summer. She mustn't get thrown off the

course. And she had to meet Jess as soon as she could get to Soho after the afternoon session ended, because they had work to do. And what if Ben's flight was delayed? She couldn't go to the airport to meet him. Funny, she thought, six months earlier she'd have walked barefoot to the airport in a blizzard to see him as soon as he arrived. Now, somehow, it seemed she wouldn't. He'd probably expect to stay with her, she thought.

Had the man who'd colluded in Vanessa's attack really been her father? Dominic and Joe had seen the man only briefly five years earlier. Now all they had was a photograph to go on. But she knew whoever the man was he'd reacted just the way her father would have. To that man – her father, or anyone like him – what happened to Vanessa would have been just an episode, something involving a woman of no account, a bit of trash from the streets. What had happened to Vanessa then, he would reason, was probably what had happened to her before and would do again. The important thing would be to deal with it, quickly and quietly. But, she thought, if it had never happened, if her father, or whoever it was, had helped Vanessa instead of throwing her out in the street, she might have felt more like someone who deserved to live. Ellen would not now be so sad and disillusioned and Joe and Dominic so profoundly cynical about what they and anyone like them could expect. It's a nightmare, she thought, all a nightmare.

She went to sleep eventually. Too early, her alarm rang and she got up to read some of the bundle of scripts she'd taken from Camera Shake the night before. She felt horrible knowing she was pushing aside Dominic and Joe's story. She could not stop to consider the problem of Ben and what she thought about him.

At lunchtime she rang Jess from the call box in the hall of the computer centre and asked if she could organise a Camera Shake car to collect Ben from the airport that afternoon.

"Ben? Back? Oh God!" cried Jess.

"Can you do it?" Fleur asked desperately. "I'm in a call box – the money's running out."

"Give me the details," demanded Jess and Fleur did so.

"But where's he going to—?" asked Jess. The connection was broken. Yes, thought Fleur, as she went back into the classroom, that's what I'm

wondering – where’s he going to sleep? Perhaps he had somewhere fixed up already. Perhaps.

When Fleur arrived in Debs’ luxurious office, where Jess was mixing herself a martini, there was no sign of Ben. Fleur thought hopefully that he must have arrived there, then gone off somewhere else. She was surprised at how much of a relief this seemed to be. It was, she told herself, nothing to do with Ben. It was just not a good moment for this. Then she grinned, remembering how she and Jess had once laughed at people who used that phrase, “Not the best possible moment”, when asked to help.

“The driver called from Heathrow,” Jess told her. “The flight’s three hours late so he’s still there, waiting. The plane’s due in any time now.”

Fleur said, “Oh.”

“You don’t look happy and excited,” Jess observed.

“It’s not the best possible moment,” Fleur told her. Jess smiled. “Maybe I’ll feel different when he turns up. At the moment it’s the last straw. I’ve had a shock about my father – don’t ask.”

“Forget it, Fleur,” Jess told her. “Let’s get something done before Ben walks in. Did you find anything?”

“No. Did you?”

“No. Here’s another couple of scripts from agencies. This one came in today by hand from Adam Wheeler. It was almost in production in Hollywood at one time only the financing collapsed. He thinks we could get it if we wanted it. It’s about a man on the run with a baby.”

Fleur groaned. “Calls first, then faxes,” she said. Jess handed her a sheaf of slips.

Almost an hour passed and they had just begun on the faxes when Ben walked in with a holdall over his shoulder. He dumped it on the floor, embraced Fleur, kissed Jess on the cheek and said, “Well – busy girls – what goes on?”

When they’d told him he said, “Phew, not bad. Any chance of a drink?”

Fleur moved to get it for him just as Jess said, “Help yourself.” He did this, saying, “I was hoping for some dinner. Believe it or not, it’s been twelve hours and I never eat on planes.”

“We have to finish up here,” Jess said. “This is a second job for both of us at the moment. We have to set things up quickly.”

“Fleur?” Ben said. “You can finish up here, can’t you, Jess?”

Jess said, “Why don’t you go down to Bonzo’s and we’ll come along in half an hour?”

“OK,” he said and turned. “Oh – I’ve got no cash. Has Camera Shake got a tab at Bonzo’s, Jess?”

“I’ll make a call,” she offered.

“Thanks,” he said and as he went added, “Guess what I’ve got in my bag – a script you’ll love.”

“Who by?” Jess asked.

“Me, naturally.”

After Ben had gone Jess ran both hands through her thick curly hair. “By me, naturally,” she echoed. “Every time I see Ben I think he’s going to fling a scarf lightly round his neck and say, ‘Well, chaps. Must dash. I’m just off to a tutorial at Balliol,’ and then stride off youthfully through the dreaming spires.” She added, picking up a pen, “That Oxbridge manner’s worth every penny they pay for it. Pity they never seem to pay for anything afterwards.”

“You’re just jealous because you never went to university,” Fleur said.

“I am,” Jess agreed with the phone in her hand. “Is Dick there? Good. It’s Jess Stadlen. A man called Ben Campbell’s coming in. I’ll be in later. Can you look after him?”

“You don’t like Ben, do you?” Fleur asked.

“Of course I like him,” she said. “He does good work if he’s given the chance. But he needs to be teamed up with someone who’ll keep him on the straight and narrow. Handle the boring bits.” She looked hard at Fleur. “He’s a magnet to women like you, Fleur. Nice, intelligent women from decent homes who look for clever, talented men who’ll treat them apparently as equals.” She shook her head. “Dream on.”

Fleur didn’t reply and went on sending faxes. Then she said, “We need a mission statement, Jess. I’m faxing all these writers and agencies saying vaguely we want to make films. It’s not enough.”

“I know,” Jess said. “Let’s think something up.”

And they did, though as they did so Fleur became increasingly conscious of Ben sitting in Bonzo’s, waiting. Occasionally she thought of what Dominic and Joe had told her about her father’s behaviour on the night Vanessa was attacked.

“Well, that’s it. Three sentences – small to medium budget films with something to say depending on skill and viewpoint of writers and directors

and brilliance of British actors, with valuable US input or words to that effect, in any order you like,” said Jess. “Is that good enough?”

“Better than nothing,” said Fleur, scribbling.

“Is there something on your mind, apart from me being nasty?” Jess asked her a little later.

Fleur did not look up from the computer, “Yes,” she said. “There is. But I can’t stop to tell you.”

“Bad?” hazarded Jess.

“I think so,” Fleur said.

“About Ben or that next-door Irishman?”

“My father,” said Fleur.

Jess said no more until fifteen minutes later when she suggested, “Let’s stop.”

“Right,” said Fleur. She tidied up, closed down the file on which she was logging their present activities and fell into one of Debs’ deep easy chairs. “Jess – can I tell you something?”

“As long as it doesn’t end with you asking me to take Ben home with me,” Jess said evenly.

“It’s not that,” Fleur said. “Though isn’t it funny how we argued about him once?”

“We probably will again,” Jess said. “He’s just suffering from a temporary desirability failure. But hurry up, Fleur. We’ve got to get to Bonzo’s. I’d like to get home, see my husband tonight.”

Fleur sat down and told Jess about the attack on Vanessa by the Russian, and what Dominic and Joe were saying about her father’s part in the affair.

After she’d finished Jess said nothing for a while. Then she commented, “They could have been mistaken. But from his description it sounds as if the Russian could have been this Tallinn they’re all looking for.”

“Who’s he?” Fleur asked.

“There’s some sort of a mystery,” Jess told her. “He’d been caught smuggling plutonium. Apparently he was in Britain but the Germans wanted him and now he’s on the run. Probably back in Russia by now. I’m not sure of the details, but Adrian’s interested. They’ve got an idea at the paper there might be a story in it but they can’t get enough to make it stand up. Adrian’s got the photos of him – he’s fantastically attractive in a frightening sort of way. Young and very skinny with long hair, so fair it’s

white. Very distinctive. That's why I wonder if he's the same man who attacked this girl. But he couldn't have been with your father – what would your father be doing with a man like that? I'll get a couple of the pictures of him from Adrian. You can show them to the others." She paused. "Listen – Fleur – are you taking Ben home with you tonight?"

"That depends what his plans are."

"Trust me – he hasn't got any," Jess assured her.

At Bonzo's they got a table and had a short dinner. Jess signed the bill and left. Fleur told Ben, "Unless you've got any money we'd better leave."

"What happened to the big-time new job?"

"I only just started. I haven't been paid."

"Let's go home, then. I'll get a bottle of wine."

Ben cashed in some dollars he had in his wallet and they bought the wine and got on the tube for Cray Hill. On the train Ben counted out the stops on the tube map. "Not very central, is it?"

"No, but it's very downmarket when you get there," she told him.

They sat silently side by side as the train rattled on. Ben looked discouraged, sorry to be back in Britain perhaps, she thought, and certainly pretty sorry to be going to Cray Hill with her.

"I spoke to Gerry Sullivan about Verity's debts," she finally said. "I've got an appointment with a firm he says will help. Do you want to come along?"

"Not much, but I suppose I ought to," he said.

"How did it go with Arnoldson?"

"I got to New York, slept in a rat-trap hotel, had a meeting which was pretty obviously just a courtesy to Arnoldson, spent a bit of time with some friends in Cape Cod. It was freezing. I left before I committed suicide. Look, Fleur, you did me a lot of damage by running like that. By the time I returned to New York I was just the guy Dickie Jethro's daughter had left Barbados to escape. It didn't help my credibility. The word was out, suspect this man. The result of the meeting in New York was more or less a foregone conclusion."

"Was that what they all thought – I'd gone because of you?" Fleur asked.

"They didn't say so openly. But they didn't really need to, did they? They'd picked me up and brought me over because of you and suddenly there wasn't any you. People were bound to wonder. The reality is, when

you left like that you didn't just fuck yourself up, you fucked me up too. You left me with egg on my face, Fleur. Admit it."

"I can't really deny it, can I?" said Fleur sulkily.

The air in the empty carriage was full of rancour. Fleur wondered how on earth they were going to coexist in her small flat.

They got out of the train and walked down Cray Hill High Street in silence. Fleur wasn't looking forward to Ben's reaction to her flat. And then there was Dominic. Ever since Ben's announcement that he was returning she had been deliberately not thinking about Dominic's reaction to him. But they'd meet sooner or later, she knew that.

The meeting came sooner. They'd almost reached the pub when, on the other side of the road, she saw Dominic and Joe in working clothes, carrying toolbags. They were practically opposite when the pair decided to go into the pub for a drink before going home. They started to cross the road.

"Hi," said Joe, spotting Fleur and Ben.

"Hi," said Fleur without enthusiasm. "Ben – next-door neighbours, Dominic and Joe. Dominic and Joe – Ben."

Ben, though travel-worn, was wearing expensive casual clothes including a pricey leather jacket. Dominic and Joe were in jeans and donkey jackets.

"Hullo, Ben," Dominic said in a very friendly way. "We were just going in for a quick one. Do you two want to come? It's on me. We're on overtime for the foreseeable. The contractors are behind and they've got a penalty clause. We'll be rich men when it's done."

"Well," said Fleur, looking at Ben doubtfully and hoping he would refuse the invitation. She didn't want this meeting. But Ben was quick enough to suspect this and said, "Sure. Why not? Just a quick one and then we'll head home."

As soon as they sat down and Patrick had brought over some beers, Dominic opened by raising his glass and saying, "Cheers, Ben. Good to meet you at last. Heard a lot about you."

"Is that a fact?" said Ben. "I haven't heard anything about you."

"Lots to find out, then," Dominic said cheerfully.

"I'm looking forward to it," Ben told him. "What are you working on?"

“A big new bank in the City. The tallest building since – since the last tall building, I suppose ... You do TV documentaries, then, do you? Anything particular at the moment?”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Ben told him. “To set something up. Oh,” he said, turning to Fleur, “can you read that script of mine tonight?”

“I’ll try,” said Fleur.

“Keep the women working, that’s the idea,” Joe said. “Can’t do much of that in the building trade – there aren’t enough women involved. I wish there were.”

“They’ll end up taking over,” Ben predicted.

“It’d be a change,” Dominic said.

“Just wait, mate. You’ll find out,” Ben said warningly.

Fleur had been nervous about the encounter between Dominic and Ben partly because she suspected Dominic might get aggressive, a fear which subsided when Dominic had greeted Ben like a long-lost brother. Her second worry was that Ben would guess she’d been sleeping with Dominic. He might not immediately suspect that Fleur would have begun a relationship with a man off a building site, but Dominic’s spectacular good looks could make him start to wonder fairly soon.

“I read something that said if you’ve got enough confidence in yourself, a woman boss doesn’t bother you,” Dominic informed Ben.

Ben took it badly. “Oh – you’re a bit of a reader are you?” he questioned, his voice rising. “Where would you have picked up that little item – the agony page of the *Sun*?”

Dominic agreed. “That was probably it.”

Fleur intervened, “I didn’t have a chance to tell you, Dominic, but I’ve got a new job. I think I’m going to have to give Patrick notice.”

“Shame to give up a good job like that,” he said. “What’s the new one?”

Fleur explained, adding, “I know you’re not in love with Jess—”

“Who is?” asked Ben. Fleur frowned at him as if to tell him she knew about his brief affair with Jess. Undeterred he said, “She may be your friend but you’ve got to admit she’s a bit of a bitch.”

Fleur told Dominic, “Her husband’s got some pictures of a Russian for you to look at. Might be the same man.”

“Right,” said Dominic, thinking.

“What Russian’s this?” asked Ben.

Joe asked, "What pictures?"

"The man seems to be a criminal. He's in the news and Jess's husband has some photographs."

"Fleur," Ben said, "what's all this about?"

"It's a long story," she told him. "I'll tell you about it." She noticed this promise did not please the others.

Ben stood up. "It's been nice but we must get back. We've got a bottle to drink and Fleur has a script to read. Come on, darling." In this way he stated his claim to her. She thought this was more an automatic gesture rather than any suspicion that she and Dominic had been involved. Seeing no way of not going along with this alpha male demonstration she stood up. Joe stared at her enigmatically.

Dominic smiled. "Enjoy your wine," he said.

"We've got a lot of news to catch up on," Ben told him.

Crossing the road, Ben took her arm, a gesture which would have been visible from the pub. She concluded Ben had probably lost the encounter with Dominic on points. He'd been obviously aggressive, ready to lose his cool. Dominic hadn't, which probably gave him the advantage. So, who's counting? she asked herself impatiently. Dominic and Ben are, she answered. At bottom she knew Dominic had spotted her ambivalence about Ben and enjoyed it.

Inside the flat Ben looked round. "Couldn't you have found something better than this, Fleur?"

It was as if he'd spent every minute since they'd met studying how to jar her. Was it deliberate? she wondered. It certainly felt like it. But how on earth did he expect them to get on together if all he did was upset her in small ways? "I didn't have a lot of money after the bank took the flat," she said. "I wouldn't have had this if Jess hadn't gone to Gerry Sullivan. He offered to fight them on the grounds that I was not individually financially advised when I signed the papers. They cut me a deal rather than have a fight in court. Which actually I couldn't have afforded. So that was how I got the deposit."

She was opening the wine when he put his arms round her. "It must have been awful for you," he said. "I suppose that means this place was bought out of company funds. It belongs to both of us."

Fleur pulled away. He might be right. She pulled herself together. Calm down, she told herself. Enjoy it. Play a game. Count how many times Ben can upset you over the next hour.

She went into the kitchen and found the corkscrew, started to open the bottle. He took it from her. “You’ve got very independent in your old age.”

“Let’s go in the other room,” said Fleur. She put her glass and the bottle of wine on a tray and left the kitchen.

“Yes, let’s go back into the salon,” Ben said gloomily, following her.

He looked around again, said, “Yes,” loudly in a tone of gloomy satisfaction and threw himself into a chair.

“It’s not a palace but it’s a roof over our heads,” she said, conceding, she knew, that he was going to share the flat with her. She was embarking on a routine she had once taken for granted, the steps towards calming Ben down. There were other things she should be saying. “We’re together now. I’m sure your script is brilliant. There’s bound to be work for you here – you’re so talented.” His role would be to counter with scepticism, depression, soul-weariness and contempt for her as a kind of Pollyanna until gradually, as with the process of rocking a fretful baby to sleep, he would feel soothed and, finally, content. Had he always been so difficult, she wondered? Not really, she answered herself. He felt at a disadvantage, weak, worried about his future.

“It’s a pity you can’t take some of your father’s money,” he said. “To get you a decent place is a decent area. I suppose you’re paying a mortgage on this.”

It had been their flat five minutes ago. Now it was her mortgage. She replied, “At the moment Grace and Robin are paying it. But the new job will take care of that.”

“That’d be money from your father as well,” he said.

“Maybe. I didn’t know that when I borrowed it.”

“So what’s the difference?” he persisted.

“Ben – I don’t want to spend too long talking about my father’s money.” An instinct warned her not to tell him the story of how her father might have thrown a beaten-up Vanessa in the street. She only said, “I haven’t been in touch with the Jethros since I left Barbados and they haven’t contacted me. I’ve blotted my copybook for good. And I don’t really care.”

“There’s such a thing as an apology, offered and received. Why don’t you just say sorry? He just wants to help you. He’s not after your immortal soul. Can’t you give a bit?”

“I saw enough in Barbados to know it doesn’t work like that. That help turns into debt, which you have to pay back in different ways, ways you didn’t expect. There’s no such thing as a free lunch, Ben.”

“That’s just where you’re wrong, Fleur. There is such a thing as a free lunch. Jesus God – the man’s your father.”

“What does that mean? Robin’s my father, Ben, not Dickie Jethro. Dickie’s the man who slept with my mother, a long time ago. He couldn’t handle the consequences, went away and sent money.”

“It looks as if that’s all Grace let him do.”

“He could have found me later. That’s not the point, Ben. I just don’t care. I can’t be made to care. How many people of our age worry about their parents? If you’re sitting around in your twenties and thirties fretting about your parents either you’re a very sad person or there’s something wrong, or both.” She sighed. “It’s been a long day.”

“It’s been a long day for me, too.”

“I know.”

He put on the television and started channel-hopping. “I’ll just try and get a view. I’ve been gone a long time.”

“Yes. Do you mind if I go to bed? I’m knackered.”

“Whatever,” he said.

Fleur went wearily into the bedroom and got ready for bed. Ben appeared in the bedroom door, holding his script. “Give it a quick read,” he suggested.

She took it, went to bed and lay down to read. She was surprised that Ben, a documentary producer, had elected to write a film script, even more surprised by the theme. It was the story of Ben’s own father, who, as a young man from a small Yorkshire mining community, had found himself in post-war Berlin as part of the occupying army. He’d fallen in love with a German girl; they’d parted. Later, Ben’s father had gone on to university on an ex-soldier’s grant and qualified as an engineer. He had never forgotten this early love affair. The script told the tale of a young man from a small village experiencing war, finding himself in a ruined city, suddenly in love with a bewildered, starving German girl. It was quite good. She just

wondered if anyone, anywhere, would ever be persuaded to film it. But, she told herself, stranger things had happened.

The television went off and Ben appeared in the doorway, “So?” he questioned.

“It’s very good – very touching. I’m impressed,” she said. “I’m going to show it to Jess.”

“Oh – Jess,” he said. “Well, that’s that, then. Forget it. She’ll hate it on principle.”

“No she won’t. In any case, I have to show it to her. She’s my boss.”

“So you’ve got no power at all?”

“I don’t know. We’ve got a meeting on Monday to sort it all out. But basically Debs Smith is still in charge, Jess is her deputy and a woman called Jane Ray and I come next in the pecking order.”

“All girls together. That’s me bugged then.” he said. “Especially with Jess in charge.”

“Don’t be so gloomy,” she told him.

He started taking off his clothes. “You liked it then?”

“Oh yes, very much,” she said weakly.

He got into bed and they spent the night not talking, not touching. Ben slept deeply, but Fleur’s own sleep was light and uneasy, broken by fragmentary dreams of Dickie Jethro sitting on the terrace in Barbados, of the computer course, into which, in the dream, Dominic’s dog Jason suddenly ran, of the playing field at her school where she stood in goal with her hockey stick, ball after ball getting by her into the back of the net.

Ben was still asleep when Fleur got up next morning, still grimly determined to get to and finish her course, though every day’s incidents seemed to conspire to reduce its importance to her. Anyway, she thought, it might be best to disappear and let Ben find his feet while she was gone. He was embittered by the collapse of the business and the rebuffs he’d obviously experienced in the USA. Now, she thought, she’d have to ask Jess for an advance on her salary, otherwise they wouldn’t even be able to eat.

She was opening her front door when Dominic appeared with Jason, who was now spending his days with the Simmonses next door. They’d grown very fond of Jason, who had almost reconciled them to his owner. Mrs

Simmons said he was a godsend because he got her husband out of the house to take exercise.

Dominic gave her both a broad smile and a penetrating look at the same time. What he saw seemed to delight him. "I'm late," he said. "Got to run. What time will you be back tonight?"

"Probably around seven," she said.

"See you then?"

She nodded and went off down the steps. What had made him so bloody cheerful, she thought, considering she'd gone off last night with Ben, who'd just moved in with her? Then she got it – he could see from her face she and Ben had had a rotten evening, and that if they'd had sex at all it hadn't been any good. He wasn't doing anything about Ben's arrival, not giving any signals, not talking to her about it, not trying to get at Ben. He was just watching and waiting, Fleur decided furiously. How cool you are, Dominic Floyd. How cool.

The heating had failed at the college and she only had a drink and a bun for lunch because she was so broke. She tried her own phone but no one answered, so she left a message for Ben.

Dominic phoned her at Camera Shake that evening and said, "As it's Friday evening let's meet. I'll buy you a meal." She agreed.

"He's getting half civilised," Jess observed when Fleur told her. "Oh – I've got the pictures of that Russian. Adrian was looking through them last night. They know there's a story there. They're trying to find it. You can take them with you."

Twenty-Three

A storm's coming up here, cap'n. At dusk the old bloke with the Labrador had to retreat, clutching his cap to his head. His dog was nearly blown off its legs.

This is the part where everyone gets desperate, including me. We're getting to the end of January now, the weather horrible, cold, sleety, rainy, spring not far off but who by then could believe it would really come?

When I walked into the office one day Veronica gave me a very funny look and announced that my old friend Mr Robinson was here to see me again. She said, "He was very insistent," which meant he seemed like serious business.

I went into the office and there was mild Mr Robinson sitting on my couch reading an arms magazine. He looked up.

"Mr Robinson," I said. "An unexpected visit."

"I do apologise," he said. "It was a matter of some urgency, so I thought I'd just drop by and see if you were free."

"It must be a month since we met," said I. "That was over two young men, Floyd and—"

"Carter," he supplied. "Joseph Carter." He looked me straight in the eye. I could see why Veronica had let him in. He looked rich, he looked sensible and he looked as if he had a problem.

"I'd like to talk to you," he said. "But perhaps elsewhere?" He meant he didn't want to be recorded in my office, which he would have been – though I always deny it to the clients, who sometimes believe me.

I agreed and we went to a nearby pub and had a pint I don't think either of us wanted.

"It's more necessary now to ease Floyd and Carter out of the way," he told me. "If you can do it, I'm prepared to increase the offer to a quarter of a million."

Which would take my pay to £250,000 for what would amount to no more than a week's work observing, planning, and finally eliminating the unlucky duo. The only reason for offering this large sum for the job was that Robinson needed to keep this business a secret for ever and ever, not have it

traded off later by the perpetrator under other crimes to be taken into consideration, as a bargaining counter in getting a reduced sentence. He needed a man with a sterling record in keeping his mouth shut. I hoped they hadn't indicated to him that they had me over a barrel regarding the Irish Farm business.

Well, I was tempted. Who wouldn't have been? First by the money, second by fear of the above. If I displeased Robinson, who was to say his friends in high places wouldn't open the file on me?

It was obvious Robinson didn't intend to tell me anything about the subjects or what the business was all about. He just wanted someone nominated by other members of the club to eliminate two citizens without asking any questions.

I drank half my pint in one swallow, taking time to think. Jethro's daughter was somehow involved. Robinson might be working for Jethro. He fitted the profile of a banker: a restrained, careful, rational man who got on with the job. Not the vivid Jethro, hauling himself up by his boot straps, making deals here and there, but someone who might very easily be an associate of his. Trusty lieutenant, useful sidekick. And it figured, I realised, because Jethro was the bee's knees as far as this administration was concerned – man of the people, entrepreneurial, making a profit for the state. Jethro was in and out of Number Ten Downing Street so regularly he would be able to command the Pughs and Protheros of this world the way you or I buy a bus ticket.

But I sensed Robinson was not happy about our meeting. He was in an exposed position. Careful Mr Robinson was doing something that had to be done in a hurry and not carefully enough. Which meant there was some kind of a rush on, a crisis. This was exactly the impression I'd got from Prothero.

And it made me think. There's nothing worse than being called in to help out with someone else's crisis, and it's a lot worse if you don't know what it is.

This was the point at which I realised with full force how trying to avoid the Irish Farm investigation had led me to this point: on the verge of obliging mystery men by conducting assassinations for no reason I knew of. I was truly up shit creek. I might have to get out. The marriage was over, the business would have to go, which was a pity, but worse things happen at sea and I was on my way. They'd held this Irish Farm business over me for long enough, I reckoned, but the threat was only good for as long as I

wished to live and work in Britain. I was still hoping Robinson didn't know about it.

Robinson, meanwhile, was not pleased with me. He said, "This is a generous offer, Mr Hope."

I told him, "Very generous, but regrettably, I'll have to turn it down. I don't believe you will ever be prepared to break your employer's confidence and tell me what all this is about. And I can't proceed on that basis. You wouldn't trust yourself to a surgeon who hadn't told you what your complaint was or how he meant to deal with it. You wouldn't go to law, I imagine, without disclosing all the facts of your case to your lawyer, uncomfortable as they might be. Not if you had any sense, that is." And, congratulating myself on this little speech, I finished my pint and went to the bar to get another, to give him time to think.

When I got back to the table he had thought. He gave me a sombre look, made sure we were still far away enough for the other drinkers in the pub – an office romance – not to overhear and stuck the knife in. "I didn't want things to get to this point, Mr Hope, but I'm afraid you have little choice."

"Really?" I asked, knowing what was coming.

He knew. "I've been told an associate of yours has given information about some events which took place in Sligo. It seems there's some prospect of a trial. I've been asked to tell you that unless you co-operate they will take matters further. I gather there's a chance you could be tried and sent to jail. I think you know what I'm saying, and I say it with reluctance, but that is your situation, Mr Hope." He added, "I believe there is a witness prepared to come forward with evidence."

I took that in, trying not to show him what bad news this was.

Ireland – hundreds of years of horrible violence, treachery and betrayal and even in these days of alleged peace and reconciliation I was still stuffed. Someone was prepared to turn Queen's Evidence. Someone had turned me in to the British Government, which was aching to turn me in themselves. How fast patriotism becomes treason in this wicked world. Not that you could really excuse what happened on that Sligo farm. An indulgence from the Pope couldn't excuse it.

Who'd betrayed me? I thought I knew. When you want to find out who did anything to you it's best first to look close to home, the closer the better. Yes – I thought I knew who'd done it.

I became downcast and angry and said, "This is very bad, Mr Robinson. I'll need time to think."

"I don't think you have time to think," he told me. "Pugh tells me the authorities are ready to act very quickly."

"How quickly?" I asked him.

"I should say within days, rather than weeks," he told me. "I'd prefer an answer now, but I suppose I could wait until tomorrow."

They weren't going to give me any time to manoeuvre. "Mr Robinson," I said weakly, "why do you want me? It's obvious I'm reluctant, in spite of your generous offer. Wouldn't you be better off with a willing associate?"

"You come very highly recommended," he told me. "And you've already studied the gentlemen we're talking about."

"Let me put it another way," I said. "Mr Pugh has a friend, Mr Prothero, and Mr Prothero has trained staff accustomed to this kind of work. I'm sure you could persuade him to get his men to help."

"Oh no," said Mr Robinson, shaking his head. "That wouldn't do. That wouldn't do at all. I suspect he doesn't want to involve himself, but, more importantly, I don't want him involved. I believe if he were something might very well go wrong. I'm sorry, Mr Hope. You're our man." He added, "I must go now. I have another meeting. I suggest you think this over. I'll ring you tomorrow morning, at ten, and discuss the final details, such as payment, time and place."

He said goodbye and we shook hands and off he went. I saw him raise his arm just outside the pub and get into the taxi he'd hailed.

I sat there feeling angry and then got up and went straight to Pugh at the Home Office. I stood in front of his desk and I said, "I've just had a word with our friend Mr Robinson. He wants me to do a little job for him without asking any questions. I'm not going to ask you if you know about all this, because you won't tell me. He says if I don't do what he wants you'll shop me over the Irish Farm business."

"I'm afraid that's true, Sam," said the little prick.

I got up close to the desk and looked down at him. "Look, pal," I said. "That was war. Not technically. We weren't supposed to call it war. But privately nearly all of you did – especially your pals in the MoD and security forces. It was war – we won one or lost one – the Paddies were the

enemy. That was your attitude, that was your terminology.” I was at breaking point, or trying to seem so.

He looked at me sternly from behind his desk. “This is no longer entirely my affair. I’ve been told Mr Robinson’s needs have a high priority.” He was uncomfortable. So was Robinson. They all were. Funny.

“So high you send civilians round to threaten me?” I said. “Why can’t your own security forces do what he wants? And how high does this fucker go?”

“You can’t ask me that,” he told me.

“But I am. How high?”

“I’m not my own master,” he said.

“When have you ever been?” I got him by the collar. “How high? How high?” I was yelling.

“Sam – you’ve got to do this. Or you’ll end up in jail,” he was gasping.

I heard the door open behind me so I knew a couple of reluctant men in uniforms were behind me, hoping nothing would happen. I stuck my face right into Adrian Pugh’s and said, “Who’s the informant, Pugh? Who is it?” He was choking but he knew his men were there. So he didn’t really mind rasping out, “Roderick. Your brother Roderick.”

I dropped him back in his chair like a bag of spuds and he sat there, a bit red in the face, but pleased with himself for the blow he’d struck. I turned round and walked right out. I heard Pugh behind me saying to the guards, “Leave him.”

I walked back through fog, which suited me. I didn’t want to look at anybody and I didn’t want anyone to look at me. I’d suspected it had been my own brother who’d betrayed me.

There’d been five of us on that mission, Roddie being a replacement because Russ had broken his leg playing football on Wimbledon Common the day before. It had been too late to get one of the others so it was go short-handed or take Roddie, who was on leave from his regiment and said it would be a bit of fun. I hadn’t wanted it, but he was keen – so I let him come. The others – Kemal, Hoppo et al – were the dregs, the scrapings, and Roddie was my brother and a lieutenant in a bloody Guards’ regiment. Yet when the time came for someone to play Judas – guess who it was? He’d name the other blokes, too. The thought sickened me.

I should say now what happened that night in Sligo.

It was a nasty business, I'll confess it. A mission which went bad; unnecessary deaths; an enquiry. And I'd been in command.

And it all came down to Russ rendering himself unfit for duty. If we'd been in the army I'd have had him up on a charge, but this was Sam Hope's Irregulars, not the Queen's Own Rifle Brigade.

At nine on the night of the mission we were in enemy territory, twenty miles outside the Fermanagh border and therefore well into the sovereign state of Eire, where we shouldn't have been. Which was why it was us and not the British Army. If we were caught we'd be described as a rogue element rather than an invasion.

Our task was to take out two men army intelligence said were lying low on a farm west of Sligo who were wanted not just by the Brits but by the Irish too. It was Saturday, which was, the reports stated, when the young couple who ran the farm, who both had a Republican background, went to a dance in Sligo, taking their baby with them and leaving it with friends while they went off to enjoy themselves.

We parked our vehicles under a hedge near the track which led up to the farm and, wearing black clothes and balaclavas, set off. A dog started barking as we got close to the farm and Scottie sped off at a low run to deal with it. We hiked on a bit faster and by the time he'd cut the dog's throat – it was chained up – we were there.

Goolies and Alibi went off to the right of the farmyard, where there was a big barn and a tractor shed, while I went inside with Scottie and Roddie to search the farmhouse. Roddie and I did the ground floor, while Scottie started upstairs. By then I didn't think our targets were in the house. Then Roddie and I went up, fast, to join Scottie.

Meanwhile there were no shots from the direction of the barn, so probably Goolies and Alibi hadn't yet found anybody. They might have disposed of the targets quietly but we'd agreed that, the place being so remote, there was no real need for silent combat.

There was an attic and Roddie and Scottie had boosted me up there when Kemal whistled from outside, the signal that someone was approaching. I got down from the attic fast and as we all moved to the top of the stairs I heard a vehicle grinding up the track to the farm. I still didn't know what Goolies and Alibi were doing. I crouched at the top of the stairs with Scottie and Roddie and watched the young couple come in, he looking

frightened, the woman, holding her baby, with her mouth open in shock. Kemal was behind them, holding his gun on them.

Evidently they'd left the dance early for some reason, which was bad luck; bad luck destined to get worse – becoming, thanks to brother Roddie, more like tragedy. They'd probably only got involved because a grandfather had been in the Easter Risings. Or because sometimes it's healthier to go along with the boys.

Now all we had to do was keep a gun on them until we'd done what we had to – search the farm for the IRA men, kill them if we found them, go home quietly if we didn't.

By the time I'd reached the foot of the stairs, Roddie just behind me, Scottie behind him, Kemal had herded his captives into the sitting-room to my right and was standing in the doorway, still pointing his gun at them. I heard the woman say, "Don't kill the baby," and saw Kemal, gun in hand, make a conciliatory gesture with his arms, as if to say "Not unless I have to". We didn't speak unnecessarily in these situations, so as not to be identified by our accents.

It was a pity, what happened next. There was a shot from the yard and then through the open kitchen door I saw a man in corduroys and a jacket come running in with a gun in his hand. He veered towards the inner door of the kitchen and I shot him dead from the foot of the stairs. He fell down on the threshold, near the picture in the hall showing the couple's wedding day.

Goolies appeared in the kitchen doorway. He held up one finger to me, pointed with the same finger at the man I'd just shot, then held up two, indicating that he and Alibi had got the first man outside and the one I'd taken out was the second. There weren't any more.

This left Kemal in the other doorway, still guarding the couple and their baby, me in the hall, with Roddie and Scottie behind, Goolies in the kitchen and Alibi keeping watch outside. The two IRA men had been neatly taken out. Mission accomplished speedily and all's well. We would have tied the couple up, pulled the phone out just in case and gone home. A call from a safe place later would have seen them released. No damage.

Agreed, the bloke decided to charge Kemal. He was obviously out of his mind. Kemal just stepped back a pace, held the gun on him steadily and

said, "Get back, man," letting on he was more from Shepherd's Bush than Belfast, but otherwise, no harm.

Roddie shot him. From behind me – I felt him lift his arm – he shot him. The young farmer just fell dead in the hall. His wife, babe in arms, rushed forward, to help her husband, presumably. And bloody Roddie shot her, too, and another shot he put into her either killed or wounded the baby. We didn't stop to find out.

I couldn't believe it. My brother, a trained soldier, not in a panic situation, had turned a simple mission into a slaughter of civilians. We all stood there for a second, with the smell of blood and cordite all round. I heard Roddie say, "For Queen and country," as if he'd been at Rorke's Drift for three weeks. Then Scottie moved, disarmed him from behind and got him in stranglehold. We all turned round and left in a sober mood, Scottie frog-marching Roddie and Alibi joining us in the yard. We set off, me in front, past the body of the IRA man and the dog and took the lane towards our vehicles. Somehow in the lane Roddie became unconscious. I don't know how that happened because I never tried to find out.

We got back across the border and then they got us, very fast, out of Northern Ireland by army helicopter. I won't forget the journey back, where no one said a word. Even Roddie shut up, after he came round, when he saw the faces.

I went round next day and beat Roddie up in his barracks. My report said the farmer had offered armed resistance and the woman had gone to his aid. There was a brief, tolerant army investigation of the event at the MoD. It went off quietly – no one wanted a big inquest on the matter.

That was the Irish Farm affair. Nothing to boast about.

Brave Roderick Hope had probably got himself in some bother over drugs or debts which could get him the sack from his regiment – buttons and epaulettes stripped off; sword broken over a senior officer's knee; the long walk, head bowed, away from the regiment which had been mother and father to him. He'd offered to testify in return for the police dropping charges or getting his gambling debts paid, or whatever it was. Whatever tale he told, and it wouldn't be true, the threat was jail for yours truly and the others involved. Lie down with dogs, get up with fleas – that's what they say, isn't it?

I got back to the office in a rotten mood. You kid yourself you're in charge of your life when all the time you're just another cog in a machine bigger and more complicated than you realised. It makes you feel ill. Which I couldn't afford to be at that point. But there were still choices. Do the job – kill Carter and Floyd – take the money and go on as before but always under threat, or do the job, take the money, then pack it all in and go somewhere with the quarter of a million and my other hidden money. Be happy and rich for a long time. Just not doing it wasn't an option. I couldn't let Roddie put me and my men in jail.

The phone rang. It was Pugh. He said, "I'm not going to say anything about that disgraceful scene in my office, Sam."

"I'm glad you said that," I told him. "I'd rather forget about it myself."

"Good. Now, the point is, I've had some calls. You have to do what you've been asked, Sam, and quickly. My advice is to get it over. I've a guarantee that in that case the other stuff will all be forgotten about. That's a promise."

Was that a promise carved in stone or jelly? I wondered. "OK," I told him defeatedly. "OK. Don't worry. I'll call you when it's over."

Veronica came in with some tea. She gave me a rueful look and went out again. I drank it slowly. I'd told Pugh I was ready to do the deed and it wouldn't be long before the word went to Prothero. Then they'd put somebody on to me to make sure I did the right thing. If it looked as though I wouldn't, they'd arrest me on brother Roddie's evidence. So I didn't have too long. What time I had I'd need to use to gain knowledge – which, as we're told, is power.

They thought I was cornered, William, but my motto is, whenever anybody thinks they've given you a choice of two options, think about discovering a third. There usually is one, if you look hard enough, and oh, how it pisses them off when you find it.

I was going to talk to the guys I was supposed to kill, to find out why I was supposed to kill them. I wasn't sure if I was going to tell them I was going to kill them. I wasn't even sure if I would kill them in the end. But I wouldn't do anything until I'd spoken to them.

So, like a gunfighter of old, at about seven that evening, I shouldered open the door of the Findhorn Star and looked around me.

Twenty-Four

Dominic was waiting for Fleur in the Indian restaurant in Cray Hill at seven o'clock. The restaurant had flock wallpaper and sixteen tables, all empty. As Fleur came in someone on the staff started a tape of Indian music.

Dominic was dressed in the suit he had worn to Vanessa's funeral and was wearing a tie. She noticed, not for the first time, what a knockout he was and thought she'd say so. "Dominic," she said, "you've got film-star good looks."

He was pleased. "You should know, being in the trade."

"Have you ever thought ...?" she asked.

"Do me a favour," he told her. "It's hard enough for me to hold down a regular job. I keep wondering why."

"It must be the money."

"You can always get money. No, I'm getting too old for the streets, that's why. One day, when I've cracked how to live straight, I may take you up on your offer to make me an international film star."

The waiter came up, they made their choices and ordered. "How's Ben?" Dominic asked, a glint in his eye.

"I don't know. He's not been at the flat all day."

"What would you call him?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he said. "At one time you were carrying a big torch for him. Him going nearly destroyed you. Now he's back. So what would you call him? Your friend, lover – what?"

"I don't know," Fleur admitted. "To be honest, I don't think he likes me much, and it's mutual. It's sad really, after all there was. I suppose I think he's back and I've got to give it a chance. He's in a mess at the moment. I don't like to ask too much of him till he gets sorted out."

She was worried about Dominic's response, but all he said was, "Fair enough."

Some food arrived and he said, "Have a poppadom."

"How was your day?" she asked.

“The pressure’s on,” he told her. “Plus Joe skived off at three because Melanie had to turn up at the athletics track to try for selection for the area team. She’s a nice runner. So Joe went along to support her and we had to cover for him all afternoon. I’m not a happy worker, though. I mean, does the world really need another skyscraper in the City of London? I’d rather be working on houses for people to live in.”

“You’re a crazy idealist.”

He smiled at her. “I know. It’s part of my charm. Listen – if Ben takes a hike, do you want to be my girl?”

There had been no prelude to this question and Fleur was dumbfounded. “What does that mean, exactly?” she hedged.

“Is this University Challenge?” he asked, offended. “It’s a simple question. We could get a house, or a flat, or something.”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think,” she said.

“Don’t be too long,” he said, “or I might withdraw my offer.”

Fleur said the first thing that came into her head. “You’d have me washing your socks.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re Irish,” she told him.

“It’s true my uncle hinted he was going to leave me the farm, having no children of his own. That gives me an idea. I’ll plant you down in fifteen acres of bog, throw away my auntie’s washing machine and set you doing the laundry in a big tub in the yard. The kitchen floor’s a bugger to scrub, as well. A spoilt English beauty like yourself’d be dead in a year.”

“So you’ll be a man with land of your own?” Fleur asked.

“If he doesn’t leave it to somebody else. I told him I didn’t want it.”

“That’s a pity,” she said.

“What would I do with an Irish farm in the middle of nowhere? They’d be living on potatoes without the subsidies.”

“You could turn it into a guest house,” she said.

“I see it all now, Fleur. First a man offers a woman his heart, suggests maybe they could get a little flat together. Next, she’s got him running a hotel and making something of himself. You’re your father’s daughter, and no mistake.”

“Don’t say that,” Fleur told him.

As the food arrived he said, “I wish I hadn’t.”

She opened her bag and pulled out the big envelope containing the photographs Jess had given her. In one, the Russian, Tallinn, stood outside a large building. The foreground was a wide street. The light was obscure, a dark winter's day. He was wearing a long coat and a fur hat from which his white hair spilled. Full face to the camera, his eyes were turned alertly to one side. Though plainly at rest, something in his stance indicated he was ready to move at any moment. In the second photograph Tallinn was sitting outside a café with another man. The light in this picture was bright. Behind him was a pillar and some old masonry. He wore an open-necked shirt and dark glasses. Tallinn was looking, appraisingly, at his dark, moustached companion, a man in a white suit.

Dominic studied the first photograph and said, "Yes."

"That's him?"

He glanced at the second picture and nodded. "He's distinctive. You wouldn't mistake him for another tall guy with cold eyes and an air of being ready to do the business. The second fellow in the other picture looks nasty too."

"You're sure about this?" Fleur asked.

"I've told you – he was standing mauling Vanessa by a street lamp in a lit doorway. And that scene wasn't the kind of thing you forget, let me tell you. Show the pictures to Joe, but he won't say anything different. Who is he, anyway?"

"The Germans apparently wanted him extradited from Britain for plutonium smuggling. They caught one of his couriers. They think he deals in drugs and weapons, too."

"Russian mafia, then," Dominic said.

"Whatever that really means."

"And this guy had some kind of a relationship with your father?"

"If it *was* my father. But why would they know each other?"

"As the poet Yeats so beautifully put it, 'Follow the money'," he said.

Six men in suits came in and started arguing loudly about what to have. When the waiter came up they began to ask him deliberately confusing questions. "Oh, this is great," Dominic declared. "This was meant to be a romantic evening. First you turn down my offer of honest love, then it's down to your father and the plutonium smuggling, and as if that wasn't

enough here's the cutting edge of Cray Hill's business community playing silly buggers."

But what they were both actually thinking about was Vanessa, who had been brutalised by the man whose photographs lay on the table between them. Though Fleur picked the pictures up and put them back in her bag the atmosphere of that old, unpaid-for crime remained.

For a moment after, they stared at each other, half acknowledging this. "It's in the past now," Dominic said. "It's over. Let's forget it."

"Can we?" she asked.

"I don't know. Let's eat up and try to enjoy it and get back to your place. I'll just look in at the pub on the way, though. I've got to try to find Joe and tell him we have to go to the suppliers for something tomorrow. His mobile phone's flat and if I can't catch him in the pub I'll have to go over to Melanie's. Her mum lets him sleep there on the couch and, do you know, he's happier crunched up in her front room than in his own little bed back at the flat."

They walked down to the Findhorn where Joe and Melanie were sitting at a table holding hands.

Melanie had been selected for the area athletics team. She said, "My mum's not best pleased. I'm doing Biology and English A levels in the summer."

"We've got to go soon," Joe said. "We've got to be up at six to train."

"Must be love," said Dominic searching his pockets. "Joe – we've got to be in Park Royal by eight to pick some stuff up. Be at the van around seven thirty. I'm just checking I've got the address of the suppliers."

Fleur also rummaged. From her handbag she produced the envelope containing the pictures of Tallinn. "When I told Jess about Vanessa getting attacked, she thought from his description it could have been this Russian they're looking for. Her husband's a journalist. She gave me these pictures."

Joe looked at the pictures. His expression became angry and unhappy. "That's him," he said. "That's definitely him."

A tall man with pale brown hair and amber eyes had been getting a drink at the bar. He materialised behind Dominic and Fleur, looked down at the photographs lying on the table and said to Joe, "Excuse me. I wonder if I could have a word with you and your friend?"

Twenty-Five

I'd been in the Findhorn Star an hour before Joe Carter turned up with his girlfriend. I was getting twitchy because time was running out. My employers, the Funny Buggers, might not have known about the pub but they did have the address of the flats opposite, where Floyd and Carter lived.

When Joe came in I recognised him instantly from the cemetery photographs, but I didn't go up to him. I didn't want him thinking I was a plain-clothes man or other snoop and running off to warn the other guy. I didn't have much time, but I had enough to wait. For a while. I sat there while he chatted and held hands with his girl, wondering what the fuck he could have done to get big forces so pissed off with him they were ready to kill him. It had begun with the alleged burglary of the mews house. Had he and Floyd taken something compromising, something in the nature of the secret report Prothero had, untruthfully, once claimed had been removed? That might account for the combination of commercial and government interests Carter seemed to have lined up against him. But there are tried and true ways of silencing people with damaging information and none of them seemed to have been employed in all the years this affair had been running. In any case, Carter just didn't look the sort to start playing around with secret material. He looked ready to buy and sell stuff which had fallen off the back of a lorry, bypass his gas and electric meters, deal drugs in a small way or jump on somebody in an alley. But perhaps the other one – I didn't at that point know which was Floyd and which Carter – was the brains behind the organisation. I went on waiting.

In came Floyd, as he proved to be, with the girl, Fleur Jethro. There was something between them, that was plain, which cheered me up because it explained the connection. Nothing complicated. Just the old Adam and Eve.

A look at Floyd didn't reveal any obvious signs of villainy. Nothing, really, except what a handsome devil he was. He and the girl might not have come out of the same drawer but together they made a pretty pair. They sat down at the same table as the other two with the air of people in no great hurry – nothing on TV, work tomorrow, not a lot of money for a big night

out. Joe and his girl, a nice little thing with a lot of grit, I was thinking, sat with their backs to the pub window, the other two opposite them. Then Dominic began to go through his jacket, trying to find something and the girl, Fleur, joined in, searching her handbag for something else. She brought out a big brown envelope and started to open it, pulling out some big glossy pictures.

I stood up and went to the bar where by looking across I could just make out what the photographs showed. I saw Tallinn, in black and white, standing in a Moscow street. The photograph looked like the one which I'd seen in the German newspaper, probably part of the same set. I left the barmaid putting my pint on the bar and went close enough to hear Joe say, "That's him."

This was my moment. I went up to the table and asked the guy, who turned out to be Joe Carter, if I could have a word. The other, Dominic, turned round to look at me. Joe stared hard into my face. It was obvious they thought I was making some kind of official enquiry, and they didn't like it.

Dominic answered on his friend's behalf. "What's it about?"

Joe said, "Who are you?"

"Do you mind if I sit down?" I asked and did so anyway. I said, "I'm not the police. I'm not an official of any kind. But you two are in trouble."

I opened my briefcase and took out my business card which I handed to Joe, who studied it and handed it to Dominic. Then I took out the photographs Hoppo had taken at the girl's funeral – Joe and Fleur under a tree, Dominic standing holding the bereaved mother's arm.

"Where did you get those?" Fleur asked. At the same time she took my business card from Dominic and scrutinised it.

"I said someone was taking pictures, didn't I?" the young girl, Melanie, remarked. "Why?" she asked me.

"What's it about?" Dominic asked.

"I'm here to find out," I told him. "But I'm telling you again – you're in trouble. It's connected with something that took place about five years ago in Gordon Mews. Does that ring any bells?"

"Yes," said Joe suspiciously.

"They said you robbed the place."

"We never," he said. "Who told you?"

The landlord had come out from the back and was staring.

“The owner told the police you robbed the place,” I told Joe. “The cops were looking for you, then you disappeared. That’s all true, isn’t it? Look – I’d rather not talk here. Can we go somewhere private?”

Fleur was looking very anxious. I didn’t at the time know why. She was eager and incautious enough to suggest her own flat. Joe and Dominic disagreed, not trusting me not to pull out a gun and kill them, a not entirely ridiculous suspicion. Class came into it, as it always does in this country. Fleur recognised in me a familiar sort of figure – I could have been her Uncle Charlie, even if I was the uncle they never talked about. The others saw me as the Man, he who arrests you, prosecutes you in court, goes around taking names.

I spoke to Fleur directly. “We can sit here going through our business, if you like, in front of a pub full of people. But if anyone comes looking we’re pretty visible. Let me tell you some things. Then you judge whether we should go on sitting here.”

I said I had been hired to find them twice, once after the supposed robbery, then two months ago. I told them I had commissioned the photographs of the funeral. I didn’t mention having been hired to murder them. I did tell them a businessman and the Security Services were interested in them. “Do you know why?” I asked.

They were shaken, but not as shaken as they ought to have been.

Joe Carter played for time. He said, “For the first time in our lives we’re going straight. Even paying PAYE, stamps, the lot. Maybe they’re after him because he’s Irish,” he said, indicating Dominic.

“Where does this come in?” I asked, indicating the photographs of Tallinn on the table.

Dominic stood up. “We’d better go to yours,” he said abruptly to Fleur. He went over to the bar and spoke to the landlord, who nodded. He handed him something. When he returned, he told me, “The landlord knows where we are and he’s got a key.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed, thinking that wouldn’t help them much after I’d got them inside the flat and killed them.

As we all trooped across the road to the flat Dominic looked at Melanie and then at Joe. Joe stopped in the middle of the road and said, “Melanie, I want you to go home.”

She made a fuss but Joe was firm and eventually she went off after kissing him passionately, trailing away, looking back like a kid sent home when the big ones go off to do something exciting.

When we got to the stairs going up to the flat the two men jumped me and hustled me into some shadows by the garages. They'd signalled it in time for me to have evaded them or got my retaliation in first, if I'd wanted to. But I didn't.

They searched me fairly expertly, even checking my socks. Dominic asked me for the combination to my briefcase. I told him what it was and he put the case on the ground and opened it. It was a giveaway all right. Toothbrush and razor, clean shirt, a wad of cash – sterling and dollars – my passport, chequebooks from two banks, one foreign. He sussed that the bottom of the case was false – in it there was a second passport in another name and a third bank book. He didn't make an issue of this, since the compartment was apparently too small to conceal a weapon. Though it did. A coil of thin wire with a metal handle at each end – a garrotte, in fact. A pointless weapon for an amateur, but effective in experienced hands like mine. What you do is cripple the first man and strangle the second with the garrotte while the first is helpless. It takes about thirty seconds if you do it right. Then you do the same to the first guy. If you know what you're doing, it's not too hard, and it's quick and quiet.

Dominic obviously noted that I was packed for a speedy if not unceremonious departure, but he didn't comment, though when he straightened up his eyes were knowing.

We rejoined Fleur at the foot of the stairs. She looked very grave. She'd also remembered something. "Ben may be there."

"We'll sort it," Dominic said. "Just put your head in and see if he's there."

We went on upstairs, Dominic and Fleur in front.

"Who's Ben?" I asked Joe.

"An old boyfriend," he told me.

On the landing Fleur went to a door and put her key in the lock. Dominic unlocked the flat next door and a dog bounded out. He instantly peed up against the balcony wall then wagged his tail to excuse himself. He seemed a nice animal.

Fleur had her door open and was calling, “Ben! Ben! Are you in?” She turned to us. “He’s not.”

And we all went into her flat and Fleur turned on the gas fire and offered to make a cup of tea. The offer was accepted. She went off to put the kettle on and the three of us sat down and looked at each other.

“I’ve shown you mine. You show me yours,” I suggested.

“When you said these people were after us, meaning us no good, what was that about?” Joe asked.

If I was going to tell them I thought I’d tell them while the woman was out of the room. “They want to kill you,” I told him.

He burst out, “Fuck’s sake – what’s this about? We’ve done nothing.” He paused. “I don’t believe it,” he said to me.

Dominic looked at me evenly and asked, “How were they planning to do this?” I didn’t reply but I looked hard at him and he understood. He burst out, “Jesus Christ!”

“We’re all in trouble,” I said. Well, he knew I was, after searching my case and seeing I was ready to travel far and fast.

Fleur came in with the tea and put it down. She’d been thinking, which is what women do while waiting for the kettle to boil. They get a brooding look, like witches, as they stare at it waiting for it to start bubbling, and then they turn round and say something penetrating, often something you don’t want to hear.

She asked Dominic, “Have you told him anything?”

He said, “No. I’m wondering if this isn’t your story as well.”

She said, “I don’t think there’s any point in hiding anything. We’ll just have to trust each other.” She turned to me. “I think it’s got something to do with my father.”

I was shaken, partly, but also reassured. Something was starting to make sense. If Richard Jethro – heading up among other things, a hundred-million-pound bank; brokering the funding for the much-desired East-West railway link; about to be Chairman of the Government’s Economic Council and in general the blue-eyed boy of City and governmental circles – needed help from the highest levels, he could get it. He could, for example, ask the Home Secretary for his assistance. Who would pass his request down the line until it reached, for example, someone like Adrian Pugh.

Dominic Floyd looked at me. "We're putting it all together," he said. "Not that it makes a lot of sense. We've just got the pictures of the Russian from a friend of Fleur's."

"Tell me," I said.

Which he did, relating the miserable tale of the girl, the rape and beating and their clear view of the two men together, Jethro probably and Tallinn almost certainly. The light falling on this sorry affair became stronger.

Fleur asked, "What would my father be doing with a man like that?"

Dominic answered, saying what I was thinking. "He was in business with him. But where do we come in?"

I said, "You'd seen him with Tallinn. Initially, he must have been afraid Vanessa would go to the police. So he got his story in first. It would be his word against yours and who would be most likely to be believed? Then he got rid of the flat, the only link between you and him. Vanessa hadn't laid any charges against him, you'd all disappeared and there wasn't any connection between him and the house in Gordon Mews."

"This is all ridiculous," Fleur said. "All right, if it was my father, and if it was Tallinn, I can see why he'd try to cover up what happened. He's a respectable businessman with a reputation to protect. He wouldn't want to be involved in a scene like that. But the rest is rubbish. It's got to be. Whatever happened, it was all over years ago." She paused, looking mournful. "For him anyway. Not for Vanessa."

"If it's rubbish why was I sent to find out where Dominic, Joe and Vanessa were by a Home Office official? Then a second time by MI6? Not to mention the death threats."

"We've only got your word for this," Joe said.

"You were the one with the conspiracy theory when Vanessa died," Dominic told him.

"Do you know anything about that?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "No." I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't care. "Look," I said, "I'm not here out of the kindness of my heart. I'm here to find out what's going on in order to protect myself and my interests, because they're being threatened." I told them, "If you want to ignore me, fine. Go to work, come home, go to the pub, go to the pictures, play Sunday football for all I care. Then if one day soon one of you has a nasty accident, don't say I didn't warn you."

“All this can’t be true,” Fleur said. Suddenly she saw the light. “You came here to murder Dom and Joe?” Her voice was high and incredulous.

I stood up. “Maybe,” I said. “But I’m not doing it, am I? What I’m going to do is disappear and try to negotiate my way out of trouble. This has been useful. I’m getting an idea of what went on and why. Not all of it, but enough to start protecting myself. In return I’ve given you a warning and you can’t say it isn’t fair. What you do next is your—”

The front door opened.

To his credit Dominic was across the room in a flash, hauling Fleur from her chair and pushing her down on the floor between the couch and window. Joe jumped up and flattened himself against the wall on one side of the door. I was behind the door on the other side.

“Hey – Fleur,” came a cheerful voice. “Surprise.”

“It’s Ben,” came Fleur’s indignant voice from the carpet. “God – you bloody, paranoid fools—” She began to struggle to her feet.

It wasn’t a big flat. By the time Ben came in Dominic was surfacing from behind the couch, Fleur brushing herself down and looking irritably at him, while Joe was advancing from beside one side of the door. I stayed where I was. The dog was in the middle of the room, wagging his tail and hoping for more.

Ben was an upstanding young man with a confident air. “Playing charades?” he said. “Look, Fleur, who I’ve brought with me.”

A beautiful woman came in behind him. She wore a long fur coat and a matching hat. She had diamonds in her ears. I came out from behind the door.

“Sophia,” Fleur breathed out in a horrified tone.

“Fleur,” the woman said, advancing, her arms extended. She kissed Fleur on both cheeks, still smiling a smooth, social smile, and glanced round, taking in the flat and us. Beside her Ben was looking pleased with himself. “Ben and I have been together all day,” she told Fleur. “So he suggested I come back in the car with him and see if you were in. I hope you don’t mind the intrusion. I was eager to see you again.”

Ben took over. “Sophia – Dominic Floyd and Joe Carter, neighbours.” He looked at me, suggesting he didn’t much like the fact that I was there.

I said, “Julian Krantz,” which was the name on my other passport. Fleur frowned a bit but Dominic and Joe didn’t flicker.

*Ben said, to all three of us, "This is Fleur's stepmother, Lady Jethro."
I knew that, because I'd seen her picture in Hello!*

"I must be going," I said to Fleur.

"Me too," said Dominic. "Sorry to dash off, Fleur."

*Joe didn't say anything, just picked up his coat and headed for the door.
An unceremonious departure.*

Outside the garages was a black Rolls-Royce with a peak-capped chauffeur standing by it, looking around warily and smoking a cigarette. The lights of the Findhorn Star lay ahead, inviting us. Heedless of the possibility of a lone gunman on a grassy knoll nearby we went inside, followed by the dog.

"Whisky?" I offered. "Scotch or Irish?" Joe and I had a Scotch and Dominic a glass of Paddy.

"Back so soon?" said the landlord to me when I bought them.

"This place drew us back like a magnet," I told him.

"Give him this, will you?" he said, indicating Dominic and handing me the key.

*"That is some stepmother," Joe said, stunned, when I sat down.
"Dominic – you're the man for a bit of posh. Tell me what to do to—"*

"Fuck off, Joe," said Dominic. "Sam – or is it Julian? – do you think Fleur's in any danger?"

"I don't know," I said. "What do you think?"

He said thoughtfully, "From the minute she told me about her father finding her I knew if she took money from him she'd move away. And from that moment he's been trying to get her to take it. That woman's not therefor nothing. Ben might think he's bringing about a family reconciliation, but my idea is that they've been looking for the chance to get her back. She's made it obvious she doesn't want anything to do with them – and they're still chasing her. If anything, her father's trying to protect her. It's this Tallinn I'm worried about. Do you know where he is?"

"Probably Moscow," I said. "The Germans want him and he's got no reason to trust the Brits."

"That's good news, if it's true," he said.

"I'm worried about what she's telling her stepmother and that prick of a boyfriend," Joe said.

“She won’t say anything,” Dominic told him. “Joe, I’m going to sneak back to the flat for my stuff. I’ll get yours too, if you want. Passports too. You’d better go and hang out at Melanie’s.”

“Now you’re talking,” I told him.

He told the dog to stay behind. Joe looked down at the animal, frowning. “He thinks it’s too risky there to take Jason,” he said. “That’s a bad sign.” He looked at me angrily. “I’m pissed off with this, really pissed off,” he said. “I was happy before all this.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” I said. “Have you two got mobile phones?”

They had. I took both numbers and gave him mine.

We had another drink, mostly in silence. “I really don’t understand all this,” Joe said.

“Nor do I,” I said. “It may blow over. Most things do.”

“Storm in a teacup,” he said with gloomy cynicism.

Dominic came in with a plastic bag, presumably containing the bare necessities of life on the move. He reported, “I called Fleur and told her not to say anything to her stepmother or Ben.”

“What did she say?” asked Joe.

“She said was I mad. Of course she wouldn’t.”

“That Ben’s really keen on the Jethro millions, isn’t he?” Joe said. He turned to Dominic. “Dom – if we have to leave the country and smuggle Jason back in one more time I’ll be really annoyed.”

I didn’t stay for the debate but stood up. “I’m off,” I said. “Keep in touch.”

I was going down to Goolies’ place to arrange transport out of the country. Once the Protheros, Pughs and their masters realised I wasn’t going along with the plan to eliminate Dominic and Joe they might put out a warrant for my arrest, so I had to avoid going through the standard checkpoints. My arrangements depended on the availability of a man, a small boat and the right tide, so it could take a day or two, and meanwhile I wasn’t about to tell Dominic and Joe what I was going to do. Alliances can shift, in days, in hours...

“Best of luck,” I said. I was starting to move off when I sat down again quickly, turning my head away from the window.

Dominic glanced at me, then quickly from the window. He saw what I’d seen and said in dismay, “What’s she doing?”

Fleur, Ben and Sophia Jethro had just got to the foot of the steps of Adelaide House and were moving towards Sophia's car.

"Has she shopped us?" asked Joe.

Dominic told him, "She's going back to Jethro's to play the girl detective. Find out what's going on."

"You're kidding," I said. "Would she do that?"

"Oh yeah," he told me. "She's got a big space in her head labelled Joan of Arc. I don't like it. It could be risky, even if Jethro is her father. I mean, we don't know what's going on. And is he really going to hand over the password to his computer? Or whatever? Could she make any sense of what she finds out? This is stupid."

"Could do more harm than good," Joe said gloomily.

"Quixotic's the word," Dominic said grimly.

I wasn't depressed. I said encouragingly, "Sometimes women can be very intuitive. They can put things together from very tiny clues."

"You don't know Fleur Stockley," Dominic said. He hit the table, hard. "This table's more intuitive than her."

"She's doing it for you," I said encouragingly. It was very much in my interest that she found out as much as possible – and then told me.

Dominic was still upset. Then his mobile went and he answered it. "Hullo, ducks. Are you? OK – I've got that. See you soon." He put the phone back in his pocket. "That's her – speaking from the phone in the Rolls. She's gone to stay with the family in Eaton Square. She couldn't say much, in front of the others." He paused, "That's it, then. Fleur Stockley, crime buster. I wish she wouldn't."

"She'll be all right," I assured him. "She's staying with her family."

He looked at me cynically. "You know better than I do what those people are like. You threaten their interests and you end up on an island, or in a private loony bin."

"I'd better go," I said. "Keep in touch."

"Right," said Joe Carter. He didn't like or trust me. I didn't care. But Dominic stood up and shook hands gravely, like a little gentleman.

I went over to get my other car from the lock-up at Waterloo and drove down to Kent. I was thinking that this situation might smoke a bit and go out like so many did, or suddenly burst into flame. Sometimes you just

couldn't tell. My own priority was to make myself scarce for as long as necessary.

Twenty-Six

The party in the drawing-room at Eaton Square later that evening consisted of Fleur and Sophia, Ben and Valentine Keith. They had had dinner together. Fleur's father had not been there. He was still at the bank.

Sophia leaned back in her chair, allowing herself to look a little weary. "I'm so glad you came, Fleur," she said. "And Dickie's delighted to know you're here too. He was upset at first, when you disappeared. Then he said you reminded him of himself when he was younger: impulsive and full of ideas."

Fleur did not know how to reply, but Ben responded smoothly, "That's Fleur. Impulsive but always well-meaning."

Fleur smiled but inwardly she was very ill at ease. The ugly story involving her father on that night in Gordon Mews was haunting her. *If* it was her father. And then there was Tallinn. And some crazy plot to kill Dominic and Joe. She didn't understand anything. She hardly knew why she was at Eaton Square. No one would tell her anything here. She would not be able to affect anything, either. She'd come because the alternative, hunkering down at Adelaide House and pretending nothing was happening, seemed worse. What she really wanted, she realised, was to prove that her father had not been at the mews house, had not protected the man who had assaulted Vanessa and was therefore not guilty of anything.

Valentine was looking at his watch. "I said I'd meet Dickie here, later. I don't suppose he mentioned when he'd be back."

"He didn't, actually," Sophia said. "I don't suppose he'll be long. It's after ten. Why don't you have another drink while you're waiting?"

"It does seem late. What's keeping him, do you think?" Fleur asked, feeling foolish. As if Sophia would tell her – as if Sophia would know – as if the answer mattered.

"Probably talking to someone in the USA," Sophia said equably. "Business is a great strain these days, with so many time zones involved. When I was a little girl Father would have breakfast with us, go out to his office at ten and return at five to spend some time with us and dine with Mother and friends – oh, it is very different."

But at that moment Fleur's father came in, kissed his wife, greeted Fleur and the others. He poured himself a whisky, and looked at Fleur. "I hope you'll stay a little longer this time," he observed, smiling. "Or shall we have to lock all the doors?"

This was a joke, but Fleur felt unaccountably alarmed. The sheer thought of being trapped at Eaton Square terrified her.

"I told Sophia how like me as a young man you seem to be," Jethro went on. "It must be genetic."

"I don't think Fleur has quite your gift for finance," Ben said.

"Who knows?" Jethro said.

There was a silence as the other people in the room considered this statement. Because Jethro was controlling the drawing-room like an actor on stage, no one spoke for a moment. Then Sophia said, "Are you tired, darling?"

"Tired – no," he said. "But I have some more calls to make. I'll go to the study. Valentine – you needn't stay, but drop in to the study for a word before you go. Ben, old chap – goodnight – good to see you again." To Fleur he said, "I'm sorry to depart like this. I hope we'll meet at breakfast, for a chat."

Ben, at first by implication included in the invitation to Fleur was now, by implication again, excluded. Dickie Jethro had bade him farewell.

Valentine, ever sensitive to his uncle's desires, stood up and said, "I'll be off – Ben, can I drop you somewhere?"

Ben paused for a second, to give Sophia a chance to interject, then said easily, "Chelsea OK for you?"

"Sure," Valentine said. "I'll just go and see Dickie for a moment."

Ben came over and kissed Fleur, "I'll ring in the morning," he said. "Have a lovely sleep."

Fleur didn't ask who he was going to stay with. It crossed her mind Chelsea wasn't his real destination. He would just get out of the car in fashionable Chelsea, then make his way back from there to unfashionable Cray Hill.

"You won't be working tomorrow, will you?" Sophia asked Fleur "We can do something nice. What about some shopping?"

Fleur heard a telephone ring. "I said I'd see Jess at the office tomorrow morning. I'll be free after that."

“It sounds like a wonderful job,” Sophia observed. “Have you found anything yet?”

“Ben’s done something rather good,” Fleur said. “You explain, Ben.”

Ben did so. Valentine still did not appear. The telephone rang twice more. A kind of uneasiness developed as Ben went on waiting for Valentine to return, Sophia waited for both of them to take their leave and the far-off sound of ringing phones continued. Fleur felt tired. Watching Sophia closely, she thought she saw tension beneath her calm manner. There was something ragged and difficult about the situation, she thought, and even Sophia, with all her training, couldn’t quite smooth it over.

Ben, busking, had outlined the plot of his script and run out of material. He said, “I really ought to go. Would you tell Valentine when he gets back?”

At that moment Valentine entered the room and said, “Something’s come up, Ben. I’m frightfully sorry—”

“Don’t worry,” Ben said. “I’ll get a cab.”

Valentine left the room and, as Ben was saying goodbye, Henry Jones entered and said, “Good evening, Sophia. How are you?”

Sophia told him, “Now, Henry, don’t stand on ceremony. Do what you want to do and disappear, straight into the study. Can I get anything brought to you?”

“Some coffee would be very nice, thank you.”

As soon as Fleur and Sophia were alone Sophia stood up and stretched. She rang the bell, saying, “My goodness. What a lot of coming and going.” The muted sound of the phone reached them again. Sophia ordered coffee to be taken to the study, then said to Fleur, “I think I’ll go up, if you don’t mind. It’s been a long day.” In the doorway she turned and smiled. “Don’t forget your breakfast date with Dickie. And remember – shopping in the afternoon.”

“I remember. Goodnight, Sophia,” said Fleur. Not long afterwards she went to bed herself.

In her large and impeccable room she had a shower and cleaned her teeth, then lay on her satin-covered bed, her mind drifting. Earlier she had rung Jess and left a message saying where she was. She had tried Dominic and Joe’s flat, but no one had answered. Dominic’s mobile phone was off. What were they doing now?

The attitude of near-triumphalism she had noted in Barbados was not here in this house. It was not just London, the dark and cold of Britain. What was it? Sophia was unnerved, there were many phone calls, many people coming and going at night. Sleep swept over her. She woke some hours later, got under the covers and fell asleep again.

Dickie Jethro came into the breakfast room where Fleur sat alone at eight the next morning. He looked brisk in casual clothes, brown corduroys and a sweater. He bent over her and kissed her cheek, sat down and shouted, "Philomena!" The housekeeper was already coming in. "Bacon – an egg – sausages," he ordered.

She looked at him sternly. "Sir Richard—" she said.

"Madam's asleep upstairs," he told her. "So only you and I will know." He leaned back in his chair. "Sometimes a man needs a proper breakfast and to forget what doctors say."

"Did you work very late last night?" Fleur asked.

"Late enough for an old man," he told her. "I'd have laughed when I was twenty-five. Then again, at twenty-five I wouldn't have been trying to raise three million in cash at short notice."

"Gosh," said Fleur. "To put in a bag and give to ...?"

"Clients," he announced, "can be very difficult." He smiled. "Don't mention this at dinner tonight. Peter Strauss, my partner, is coming with his wife. Roughly put, he's the banker and I'm the investor. Unlike US investment banks, British merchant banks have depositors. Peter watches over them. So Peter's the conserver and I'm the creator. It's a natural human division, but not necessarily without its conflicts. One thing is, he can't stand the clients asking for their own money. Deep down he believes it belongs to the bank. So don't give him a shock over the smoked salmon. That's what we'll be eating because it's almost the only thing he likes."

The housekeeper brought in his plate and he tucked in. "Takes me back," he said. "When I was a little boy my grandfather was still working in the docks. He'd leave the house at six in the morning and I'd get up and have the breakfast he'd cook for both of us. I can still remember his big boots standing in the kitchen ready to put on. Huge boots with steel toe-caps. His father was a farm labourer. You're from peasant stock, Fleur."

"How did you get out?" she asked.

“Dad had an office job in the shipyards,” he told her. “I went into a high street bank, then into an investment bank. When Maggie got elected in 1979 I was at Devere Hatton, a conservative culture, slow and stodgy. Then it all took off, and, good for me, I’d just bought into Strauss Jethro Smith. You’ve heard of the Big Bang?” He was eating rapidly as he talked.

“Yes,” said Fleur.

“It made me,” he told her. “And I can truthfully say that, at a time when the competition’s overextended, Strauss Jethro Smith is still sound as a nut.” He looked at her sharply. “There’s a hole where the next Jethro of Strauss Jethro Smith ought to be.”

Fleur laughed. “I’m not the person. The last firm I had went bust,” she said.

“Almost. You have to go through it once. It’s a rite of passage. There are very few top businessmen in this country who haven’t felt the ground shaking beneath their feet at least once. That’s how we do it, for ourselves and the country. Take risks – that’s the game. The only one that’s worthwhile.”

The housekeeper came in and told him Henry Jones was waiting for him in the car outside. He got to his feet. “I’ll see you at dinner tonight,” he said.

Fleur poured herself more coffee. Her father seemed in good spirits today, she thought. Last night’s crisis, if there had been one, must have been resolved. Had he just offered her a job and a share of a merchant bank just then, or not?

She stood up and went to Camera Shake, arriving before Jess. She tried Dominic’s mobile, still off, and then their flat. No one answered. There should have been someone in, asleep, at nine on Saturday morning, she thought. So had either of them slept there the previous night?

Jess arrived, hair flying. “I showed those pictures of August Tallinn to Dominic and Joe,” Fleur reported. “They said he was the man who beat up their friend.”

As she spoke the phone went and it was Sophia, naming a place for lunch and suggesting she bring her colleague with her. Jess agreed to come along and Sophia said, “Good – I’ll book for all three of us, then.”

“She wants to fix you up,” said Jess.

“I know. There’s a dinner party tonight. The bank’s chairman is coming.”

“Try to suggest he invests in a film,” Jess said. “What are you doing back at Eaton Square anyway? I thought it was all over between you, when you took French leave from Barbados?”

Fleur knew she couldn’t tell Jess the whole story of what she was doing at Eaton Square, nor about the stranger, Sam Hope, who had turned up in the pub. Jess was married to Adrian, Adrian was a journalist and Fleur sensed that Jess, however much she promised, would not be able to keep quiet about it all. Whatever the truth was, the last thing they all needed at this moment was a journalist digging for a story.

She only told Jess, “I think they’re still trying to adopt me. I don’t think it’s any good – I’m too old. If they want an orphan they should go to a children’s home and find someone who really needs it.”

During the morning Fleur made two further attempts to contact Dominic and Joe, continued to receive no answer and became increasingly worried. The man, Hope, had suggested people were out to hurt them. Had someone already done it? Were they in hospital, or worse? Or had Hope dragged them off somewhere himself? She wasn’t sure what to do. If Dominic and Joe were in hiding, reporting them missing was not what she ought to do. But if they were in trouble, she needed to get help.

Finally, Dominic called and said, “We’re not at home. Listen – I thought my mobile was on. But be careful what you say on it.”

She had to be guarded anyway because Jess was nearby in Debs’ tiny bathroom getting ready to go out to lunch.

“Why did you go to Eaton Square?” he asked.

“I’m trying to help,” she told him.

“I wish you – well, be very careful. Fleur. I don’t know when we’ll meet again. We might have to go away, keep moving for a bit.”

“Where’s Jason?” she asked.

“Here with me. Look – I’m really sorry ... Are you crying?”

“No,” she said.

“Yes you are ... I’m in touch with the man we met last night. I’m sure we can get this sorted soon.”

“You bloody can’t,” she said. “How can you? I love you.”

“I’ve got to go. I love you too,” he said and broke the connection.

Jess came screaming out of the bathroom, comb in hand. “That was Dominic, wasn’t it? You said you loved him. You’re mad.”

Fleur told her, "It's more complicated than you think."

"Oh yeah?" Jess said aggressively. "Explain why."

Fleur could not. "Let's just go and have this lunch," she said.

Jess wouldn't leave it alone. In the taxi to Knightsbridge she said, "What's going on? How come suddenly it's Dominic? Is he in trouble? Why? Come to that, why are you at Eaton Square? There's something going on, isn't there? What's happening?"

"It's a mess," Fleur told her.

"If Dominic Floyd's involved it's bound to be. People like that are always trouble. And if you stick around you'll be in a mess, too."

"It was so straightforward with Ben," Fleur said angrily. "All I had to do was put my flat up as security for the business and then one day find him gone and the office besieged with creditors. No trouble there, of course."

"So you solved it by taking up with a street person," Jess retorted. "So – why *are* you at Eaton Square?"

They were getting close to their destination and Fleur changed the subject. "You can't say Sophia's not being nice. After all, if she has children of her own she'll want a big chunk of Jethro for them. It's still a harem situation in those circles – lots of marriages and all the women thinking about the prospects for their own offspring. Or a medieval court where everybody wants to get to the throne."

In the restaurant, a smiling Sophia greeted them. "Let's order. I want to buy you a dress for dinner tonight, Fleur. Please allow me. Dickie would be so pleased. Jess – you'll come and help, won't you?"

In this quiet restaurant with its bleached tablecloths and gleaming glasses and cutlery nothing seemed quite real to Fleur.

She thought of Dominic and Joe, with Jason. It was cold now and getting colder. Snow had begun to flurry around. If they went back on the streets again they'd be finding it hard. Soon Sophia would sign a bill for a sum which would be enough to cover two or three weeks' groceries for a poor family and then they would swan off to try on clothes in stores where even a scarf would cost as much as the meal. Then she would buy Fleur a dress. It all seemed quite easy, quite natural and as if the events of the previous night had never taken place.

For Fleur they bought a beaded dress in a faded rose colour and a velvet scarf to go with it. Jess, once they'd started shopping in earnest, got herself

a flaming chiffon shift and a lot of new make-up, her manner indicating to Fleur that in spite of Adrian's presence at home in Highgate there was a new man somewhere in the background.

They went back to Eaton Square in the car and while Sophia was discussing final arrangements for the dinner with the housekeeper Jess plopped down in a chair in the drawing-room by a roaring log fire. She gave a relaxed sigh and said, "I could get used to this."

The manservant came in, took out a large arrangement of white and yellow flowers, put them down outside the door and brought in another which he put on a low table by the window.

"I can see the flowers would be a worry," Jess continued, "and the seating plan for dinner. Otherwise I think I could cope. Fleur," she added, "you look miserable. What's the trouble?"

"I really can't tell you, Jess. Especially here." Fleur was still not sure she could trust Jess not to tell Adrian, so she prevaricated. "I'll come over tomorrow."

"OK," said Jess. "But can you find time to read some scripts? We've still got a living to earn."

"I'll try," said Fleur.

Jess looked around her, sighed, got up from the fire and said reluctantly, "I must go." Fleur went upstairs to read scripts in her bedroom.

The snow continued to fall outside her window and she imagined Joe and Dominic, and Jason, out in the street in it. Where were they? she worried, while she sat, as if wrapped in cotton wool, in the warmth and luxury of her father's house.

Twenty-Seven

After I left the pub I went down to Goolies' smallholding. It would take a bit of time for Robinson to report he hadn't been able to contact me, a bit longer for Prothero to flounder about, wondering what it was safe to do. I guessed I'd be all right at Goolies' place for as long as it took me to organise my transport out of the country.

On the way down to Kent I stopped and gave Hoppo a ring. I asked if he'd go round to Eaton Square and take pictures of those who came and went at Jethro's house. There might be a percentage, if things were hotting up, to seeing who was coming and going at Eaton Square.

Down in Kent I relaxed. Goolies and I sat in his front room with the blue curtains and the red velvet suite. There were pictures of his family – weddings, holidays and christenings – all over the room on every surface. Goolies' missis had gone off to bed with the grandchild, one that Goolies' daughter had dropped and left two years earlier. This infant slept in a crib in their bedroom.

We sat up late in front of the fire, drinking beer. I told him the whole story as I knew it and added, "I'm sorry, Goolies, but it looks as if I might have to suspend operations. For the foreseeable – maybe forever."

He said philosophically, "All good things come to an end. But it may get sorted yet. It looks like a cock-up to me. That's what happens when men behind desks get involved. They don't have to stand the consequences like you do in the field. It seems to me at stage one they should either have knocked off the three homeless kids or paid them heavily to leave the country and never come back. Threatened them a bit." He paused, thinking. "Maybe they weren't taking them too seriously at first... Tallinn and the girl's father, if it was him, had to be doing some private business neither of them wanted anyone to know about. Then Tallinn lost it with the girl he picked up and the others, Floyd and Carter, were suddenly witnesses. So Jethro called the plod and claimed the three of them burgled him, in case they went to the police with their story and all this private business came out. Accusing them of burglary would take the wind right out of their sails. Who was going to be believed – Sir Richard Jethro, important guy with

plenty of contacts, or three toe-rags off the street, one a drug addict? So the police enquiries send them flying – then it's over. But then you get called in, months later, to find them. And you can't, not with the time and money available. I can't see why they needed you. Or why they gave up looking."

"I think Jethro just wanted to keep tabs on them. So he had a word at the Home Office. He wouldn't have needed to supply any explanations. They'd just help out a pal. So Pugh was put in charge of the search. He called me. I don't know what Jethro, if it was Jethro, planned to do when he'd found them. Maybe it was just sensible reconnaissance, no action till necessary. When I couldn't find them he just thought they'd gone and were shutting up and his mind moved to other things. He's a busy man.

"Five years later, when they called me in to find the threesome again, something had to have changed. Must have. Between the first attempt to find them and the second, something else had happened."

"Got to have been all this business with the Germans wanting the Russian," Goolies said.

"That's what I think," I told him.

"Then the Dirty Tricks Department hired some fellows to kill him while he was in custody," Goolies remarked. "Nasty man, though, supplying deadly weapons to the enemy."

There was a silence as Goolies put another log on the fire and we both had another beer.

"I reckon Jethro would have been laundering money for Tallinn," Goolies said into the silence.

"I keep coming back to that," I agreed.

The baby woke up and Goolies went up and got her, so that his wife wouldn't be disturbed. He sat there with the little girl asleep against his shoulder.

"It's funny," he said. "I feel more love for this little one than I ever felt for my own kids when they were young."

I didn't comment. I just nodded. He said, "I wonder where this Tallinn is now."

"Russia, if he's got any sense. No one can find him there."

"His only problem is, if he's in Russia, his money's still here," Goolies said. "Perhaps he got it out in time."

For an hour or so we sat yawning over the fire like two old soldiers, then went to bed, Goolies carrying his granddaughter upstairs tenderly.

I lay there, a bit angry. Goolies was quite right, this was a cock-up by other people and because of it I had to leave the country in a hurry. I'd organised my trip – the Dover captain would be taking me out on the next evening's tide. I just hoped none of the many stupid people involved would make any stupid moves before I got away. Can't happen, I told myself. Then again – anything can happen, I reminded myself. Anything.

I got up after half an hour, and went down to Goolies' computer.

Twenty-Eight

Fleur, wearing her new dress, stood that evening in the drawing-room at Eaton Square beside her father, who had been at his office all day and had, he told her, returned at five. He looked determined and perhaps a little tired. Now he glanced at the white and gold clock on the mantelpiece and said to her, "Do you think you could go up and remind Sophia of the time? She doesn't always leave herself enough time to dress."

As she left the room he was moving towards the drinks, which were laid out on a long marble-topped sideboard. Her father had come a long way from the semi in Gravesend, she thought, to stand, a masterly figure in a dinner jacket, pouring himself a drink in his drawing-room in Eaton Square, looking as if that were his natural environment. It was now, of course.

Sophia's bedroom was empty and Fleur discovered her in the dining-room, her face and hair done but still wearing an elaborately embroidered *robe de chambre*. Head tilted, she was examining the large circular table which had been laid with napkins, glasses and cutlery. In the centre were three little silver filigree bowls of ferns and cream roses.

"The flowers. What do you think?" she asked Fleur. "Would dark blues and reds be better? I can't make up my mind."

"Dickie asked me to remind you of the time," Fleur told her.

"One needs colour in the winter," Sophia mused.

Fleur looked over at the two large urns filled with flowers and dark foliage which stood on each side of the French windows, over which cream curtains had not yet been drawn. "There's the colour," she said, indicating the urns. It was dark outside. Only shadowy trees could be seen in the ever-present garden under the glow of London night-time skies. But the snow, now a thick carpet, cast another, whiter light upwards. Then she thought she saw, about twenty metres down the garden, a black figure crossing the white surface of the ground. "Sophia!" she cried out. "There's a man in the garden!"

Sophia ignored her. "I think you're right. The roses are very sweet and Sir Peter's such a puritan at heart. They'll please him and his wife."

"Sophia," Fleur insisted, "there's someone in the garden."

“It must be a man from the security firm,” Sophia told her. “There’ve been some threats to the bank. It happens sometimes, but because Sir Peter’s coming, Dickie called them in as a precaution. There are a couple of men at the front, too. It’s horrible, but if we were anywhere else but London we’d have them with us all the time.”

She crossed the room briskly and swept the curtains across the windows, saying, “We don’t want to see heavy men prowling about while we’re eating. I’ll dress now. Go and do the honours for me, Fleur, and tell Dickie I’ll be five minutes – less, perhaps.”

Fleur returned to the drawing-room to find Hugh Cotter and Valentine and Diana Keith had arrived.

“We’re only short of Sir Peter and his wife and the Haussmans. You speak Spanish, don’t you Hugh?” Dickie queried. “I gather Sophia’s put you next to Mrs Haussman, Francisco’s new bride.”

“Glad to oblige,” said Hugh. Fleur realised that Ben must have been dropped in favour of Spanish-speaking Hugh. She found she didn’t mind at all. Not his fault. Nor hers.

Sophia swept in. She went over to kiss her husband and he put his arm round her. The door then opened and Sir Peter Strauss, a tall, thin, long-faced man in his fifties, came in with his small, plump wife. By now Fleur had come to recognise the vintages of wives in these circles – the old ones, dusty bottles acquired in youth and preserved thereafter, lovingly or unlovingly; the younger, but not very young ones who were the second wives, more suitable, reliable vintages; then came the third, or fourth, or even fifth wives, late pressings, sparkling wines without much flavour but plenty of fizz and pop. Lady Strauss was an old wife, her hair cut and permed by a hairdresser who knew how to keep order and wearing a very pretty gown patterned with roses.

Introductions were made and Dickie told Sir Peter, “We’re just waiting for Francisco Haussman and his wife.”

“Good,” Sir Peter replied. “Might have a word after dinner, if Sophia doesn’t mind?”

“As long as it’s only a word,” she agreed.

Lady Strauss, having commanded a strong gin and tonic, began to interrogate Fleur. “I was astonished to see from *Hello!* magazine that Dickie

had an older daughter – and such a pretty one. The photographs were enchanting. Why did he keep you a secret for so long?”

“He and my mother agreed about that, I think,” she said.

“These things happen, of course. But still – if my husband had such a pretty daughter I’d insist on his producing her. Not that it’s very likely,” she said, glancing at the grave figure of Sir Peter Strauss, who was talking earnestly to Valentine and Diana Keith. “No – I don’t think Peter has a secret daughter. What a pity. We have only sons. Now – tell me what you’ve been doing with yourself all this time. Are you married, or going to be?”

“Emily’s incorrigible,” said Sophia, at Fleur’s elbow. “She won’t rest until she knows everything about you.”

“There isn’t much to know,” Fleur said.

“I ask only because, as you know, I need someone to marry my son,” Emily Strauss told Sophia. “Thirty and still on the loose. I really must have a nice daughter-in-law soon and some grandchildren. Did you see that awful piece in the *Daily Mail* about him? Who didn’t? I told him to sue but he said it wasn’t worthwhile.”

“That’s probably true,” Sophia said.

“I need someone just like Fleur,” she said, peering at her. “I can tell immediately by looking at her. Now – have you a husband or are you dedicated to a career?”

Fleur was laughing when Francisco Haussman, a tall, lean, blond man in his forties, came in accompanied by a woman no one was likely to mistake for his first love and the wife of his youth. She was no more than twenty, exceptionally beautiful, with huge dark eyes and piled black hair in which small pearls had been woven. She wore a clinging gold dress and high gold sandals.

“She used to be a model – or *something*,” whispered Emily Strauss. “My goodness, look at those diamonds.” Round Maria Haussman’s neck was a long chain of large diamonds. Fleur gazed in awe at the glitter and sparkle. “I must just go and say hullo,” said Emily. She bustled over to the Haussmans, while Sophia went off elsewhere and Fleur found herself alone until Diana Keith came up, a cold and mercantile gleam in her eyes.

“Get those diamonds,” she remarked. “It certainly pays to be a teenage lap-dancer.”

“I suppose we’re both too old to take it up,” Fleur said.

Diana ignored this. “We were a bit amazed when you bolted off like that. We hoped it was nothing we’d done. Is all forgiven and forgotten?”

“I think so,” said Fleur, thinking glumly about what she was meant to be doing at Eaton Square – finding out the truth – and how far she was from doing it.

“So you’re the blue-eyed girl again,” Diana said. “Listen – don’t let Dickie down like the others. Oh,” she said, as Valentine came up, “I wish I was at home. I can’t stand these dos, bankers and their wives. At this time of year one yearns for a comfortable chair, a good fire and a video.”

Valentine told her, “Bear up, darling. We’re going in.” He took her arm.

Hugh said, “Nice to see you again, Fleur,” and taking her hand led her across the hall into the dining-room.

The lights were low and candles burned on the table. With his back to the window Dickie Jethro sat with Peter Strauss to his left and Sophia on his right. Fleur, sitting opposite her father, had Francisco Haussman on one side and Emily Strauss on the other.

The housekeeper brought round the promised smoked salmon. There was also a concoction of shrimp on each plate. While Emily Strauss kept up her interrogation of Fleur she noticed Hugh further down the table chatting energetically with Maria Haussman. Dickie was talking to Peter Strauss, whose long face expressed no emotion at all. She looked at her father, solid and determined, outlined against the pale dining-room curtains, and saw him suddenly as a portrait of some old merchant of an earlier age. She explained to Emily Strauss that she had a new job, which she thought she might enjoy.

“You’ll have to give it up when you marry my boy,” Emily said sternly.

“And what will you be doing while I marry your son and bear the grandchildren?” asked Fleur.

“I’ll be in my garden,” she said very seriously. A conversation about orchids, highly technical and incomprehensible to Fleur, began between Francisco Haussman and Emily. His rather intimidating face broke up as he spoke. Fleur, relieved from the struggle of trying to find something to say to her neighbours, who were speaking over her, leaned back a little and let her eyes drift round the table. The conversation murmured on. Sophia bent a shining head the better to catch what Valentine was telling her. Maria

Haussman laughed loudly at something Hugh had said. A second course, tiny tournedos steaks in a sauce, was served. Glasses were filled with red wine from which a gentle bouquet arose.

A servant in a white jacket brought Dickie a message, which he read and put in his pocket, with a wry glance at Peter Strauss, indicating, perhaps, that some people always had the ability to disturb others in their own homes at meals, however unimportant their business might be. Diana Keith, leaning forward, asked, "Liking it here?" Fleur nodded and smiled. It was true that she felt less uncomfortable than she had during her first visit to the house. It was surprisingly easy to fall into this warm bath of good food and unchallenging talk round a pretty table. She saw Sophia lean towards her husband, smiling, patting his hand.

There was the crash of breaking glass, the curtains were parted roughly from outside and a tall man in a long, dark leather coat, black trousers and a sweater, his long white hair flying, stepped through.

A complete silence fell, broken only by the screeching of the alarm. Then Maria Haussman screamed.

Dickie Jethro had turned in his chair when the glass broke. Now, seated in his chair, he was only two metres away from the intruder. He began to rise.

"Sit down," said the man in black.

Dickie went on getting up saying, "August — what are you...?"

The man reached into his jacket and brought out a 9mm revolver. "Sit down," he said.

Maria Haussman began to cry. Fleur heard Valentine Keith moan, "Oh my God," under his breath. No one dared move.

The intruder said to the housekeeper, standing in the doorway with a dish in her hands, "Turn the alarm off." With her eye on the gun she crept from the room and moments later the noise stopped.

Fleur thought she must be ringing the police, that it would not be long before this scene was interrupted. This gave her some comfort. She thought if they could just hang on, soon it would be over. She noted an empty place at the table, Maria Haussman's. She must be on the floor, underneath the table, Fleur concluded, and wished she was too.

Meanwhile the man had pushed Jethro back into his chair and said loudly, "I want my money. Give me my money now." He had a strong

Russian accent. It was Tallinn, Fleur knew. And understood immediately that the story of Vanessa's attack, and possibly the hiring of an assassin to eliminate the witnesses to it, Dominic and Joe, was true too. And that they were all in danger. She was praying no one would do anything to upset Tallinn. If someone did, someone might die. They all might.

Nervelessly, Peter Strauss, his head turned towards Tallinn, asked levelly, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Looking down on him Tallinn said, "I am a man who wants his money from his bank. Who are you?"

"I am Peter Strauss, chairman of Strauss Jethro Smith," he said.

Dickie Jethro said, "August – we must go and discuss this somewhere else."

"We have discussed this," Tallinn said. "We have talked and we have talked. Now you will give me bearer bonds for my money, all of it. Tonight." He glanced at Sophia, who flinched.

Peter Strauss asked the banker's question. "How much?"

"I'll take twenty-five million. It's all OK – in trusts and those things. He will tell you." He gestured at Jethro with his gun and Jethro nodded. "I will have it now," Tallinn said.

"August," Jethro said desperately, "you've had three already. The rest will take three days."

"I think you have stolen my money," he said to Jethro. "I want it. Will you give me?" he asked Peter Strauss.

"With the proper guarantees I can get the money to anywhere you choose."

"And take it back when I'm gone," he said. "I want the money now, in my hand."

"You can't have it, Tallinn. It can't be done," said Dickie Jethro. He advanced towards Tallinn. Fleur gasped.

Tallinn halted him by pointing the gun straight at him. "The police come soon," he said. "Give me the diamonds of the woman under the table."

Hugh, very pale, bent down and spoke to Maria Haussman. Slowly, her white hand came up holding the string of diamonds. As if they were playing some terrifying version of Pass the Parcel, Hugh passed it to his neighbour, Valentine Keith, who passed it to Peter Strauss. The others watched the

glittering necklace travel from hand to hand in complete silence. Peter Strauss held it aloft for Tallinn to grasp.

Tallinn bent, put his arm past Jethro and took it, his gun still pointed at Jethro's head. From her seat, only an arm's length away from the two men, Sophia Jethro gazed at her husband, her face a mask of terror.

Tallinn expressionlessly pocketed the necklace and said to Peter Strauss, "I want my money. You will get me my money?"

Peter Strauss said, "I can't. Not now. If you will wait—"

There was no change in Tallinn's expression as he shot Dickie Jethro through the head and it seemed almost before he fell Tallinn had leapt back through the broken window and was gone.

Sophia screamed, "No!" and fell beside her husband on the floor.

Fleur screamed. Valentine Keith was on his feet, talking into his mobile phone. Sophia was shouting, "He's dying. He's dying." Keith went to her and said, "I've called an ambulance."

Beside Fleur, Emily Strauss was saying, "Oh God. Oh God." She was shaking so hard Fleur could hear the legs of her chair rattling on the floor. Maria Haussman lay on the floor on the other side of the table, sobbing, her husband beside her.

Hugh Cotter stood up, said, "Sorry," and bolted from the room with his hand over his mouth. Fleur stood and began making her way slowly, as if in a nightmare, towards Sophia and her father, when, astonishingly, Peter Strauss, at the head of the table, tapped on his glass. It was as if he were about to deliver an after-dinner speech, he appeared just as calm.

He said, "Please listen very carefully. The police will be here soon. It's in all our interests, especially Dickie's, that we all tell the same story. This hideous crime is the result of an interrupted burglary. Dickie tackled the criminal when he came in and was shot. That's it. That and no more. None of us will give the man's name, if we know it. We will describe him as tall, with a London accent. We will say he made us close our eyes. It happened too quickly for us to be able to describe him accurately. The episode took only moments. Dickie tackled the intruder and was shot. Is that quite clear? It is most important to do as I say." He added, "Haussman – will you go and tell this to the man who just left the room? Keith – ring Sir Henry Standing. Say there's been an accident. Ask him to stand by."

He went to Jethro's side. Fleur, also approaching, saw scraps of bone and flesh on the polished floor beneath her feet. Sophia was crouching beside her husband, who lay on the floor, a large pool of blood spreading beneath his head. His face was grey but his eyelids flickered. He seemed to be feeling no pain. Sophia was holding his hand and murmuring to him.

Peter Strauss stood gravely, with Fleur, at Jethro's feet. He said to Sophia, "Keith's ringing Sir Henry Standing. He'll ask him to go straight to the hospital and get ready for surgery." Sophia did not acknowledge this.

Fleur looked into Strauss's bone-white face and felt a reluctant admiration for him. He had just seen a close colleague shot, must have known at that point that he might have been Tallinn's next victim, yet now he had organised a cover story and a surgeon within minutes. She looked at her father and wondered whether he would live.

The police arrived and, moments later, the ambulance. Fleur's father was lifted on to a stretcher. Fleur got a coat and put it over Sophia's shoulders as she left the house, bent over the stretcher and still holding her husband's hand. She followed them to the front door where she heard Peter Strauss tell the ambulance men firmly, "A bullet wound. He tackled an armed burglar. Sir Henry Standing will be at the hospital in half an hour. Please tell them that."

While the police were questioning the other guests Fleur went upstairs to Sophia's small sitting-room and rang up the Andriades in Athens. They were not there but, she was told, were in Paris, at a hotel. She rang the number given to her and found the couple in their suite. She gave George Andriades the account of the matter dictated by Peter Strauss but added carefully. "There may be a little more to the story than that."

He paused for a moment, then said, "I see." He continued, "The important thing is Dickie. We'll be with you in two hours at the most." As he spoke she could hear Zoe, sobbing.

Just as she put the phone down Peter Strauss came into the room. He said, "Who were you ringing?" His face was set and his eyes challenging.

"Sophia's parents," she told him. She added, "I told them what you wanted us to say but I mentioned that there might be more to it than that."

He took the phone, pushed the redial button and got through to the hotel and, as Fleur watched, asked, "Have you a Mr George Andriades staying with you?" When the receptionist had satisfied him that George Andriades

was there he put the phone down and turned to Fleur. "The police want to see you," he said. "You will do as I asked?"

"Yes, I will," said Fleur.

"Mercifully Cotter is translating for Mrs Haussman," he said to her. He stared hard at her. "Please do as I've asked," he told her. "Until I know what's going on it's essential the story we tell is very simple. The police want to see you now. You'd better go."

As Fleur left the room she heard him asking Directory Enquiries for the number of the Press Association.

Fleur looked into the drawing-room. Diana Keith was standing by the window, her stance rigid, her expression, when she turned, angry. "They say we can't go home," she announced. She stared furiously at Valentine, who was getting himself a drink. "Haven't you had enough, Val?" she asked. "Christ – what is all this going to look like?"

"Shut up, Diana," her husband said. "Dickie's in hospital fighting for his life."

Francisco Haussman was bending over his wife, who was in a chair, half fainting. Emily Strauss and Hugh Cotter were talking. Hugh turned and said, "The police want you in the study, Fleur."

Fleur crossed the hall and entered the small study beside the dining-room. Behind a handsome glass and bronze desk sat a man in chinos and a leather jacket. At the secretary's small desk, on which a computer was set, sat a uniformed sergeant.

The man behind her father's desk introduced himself and asked her name. "Fleur Stockley," she told him. "Sir Richard is my father."

"Do you live here?" he asked.

"I'm staying here. I've been here since last night."

"All right," he said. There was a pause. "You're the last," he said. There was a longer pause. Fleur thought it best to say nothing. "So – please tell me what happened this evening, starting when you all sat down to dinner."

She told him about the man with the London accent who had made them close their eyes. How he had taken the necklace, then shot her father. She had to go through her account again, and then once more. She struggled to remember in exact detail everything she had already said and to add no more, realising that if this man had any brains at all, and it seemed to her he had, he must have begun to notice discrepancies between the different

accounts he had received. Or noted that there were none. Either way he was likely to be suspicious. She thought she detected scepticism behind his carefully controlled expression. He asked few questions, which surprised her. It was possible that he was by now just comparing the eight different, but all equally untrue, accounts he had been given.

Fleur, mechanically repeating her story, felt very unhappy. It was obvious now that her father had been the man crucially involved with the attack on Vanessa. This had contributed, Dominic and Joe had said, to the feeling of helplessness which made it easier for her to go on taking drugs, harder to get off them. So Vanessa had died.

She felt she couldn't deal with all this. But here were the police, questioning her. She had to try, though, tired and disillusioned, she didn't really care whether the cover-up worked or not.

During her third recital of the evening's events the inspector ceased to conceal his incredulity. Finally he looked over at his sergeant and said, "OK, Sergeant Connor. Have you recorded accurately what this young lady's chosen to tell us?" When Connor confirmed this, he said, "We'll want a formal statement later." He added, "You realise there are penalties for making a false statement to the police."

Fleur stood up. "You know this is a murder enquiry, don't you?" he continued.

Fleur thought her father must have died and no one had told her. "My father ...?" she asked, alarmed.

"The security man posted in the garden was killed," he told her. "And his dog, as it happens."

"He killed them?" Fleur asked.

The man nodded, "With a knife, quietly and skilfully."

"It's like a nightmare," she said.

"Yes, Miss Stockley," he said, "it is."

She went back across the hall. This bad dream had been going on since the night before when Dominic and Joe had recognised the picture of Tallinn, when Sam Hope had turned up in the pub, when she had decided to come to Eaton Square. She could have been killed while Tallinn was in the dining-room. If anyone had made a false move he might have shot any one of them. The fate of the security guard, someone who had left his base that

day thinking it was just a routine bit of work, had brought it all home to her suddenly.

She was trembling as she reached the drawing-room. Valentine Keith held the phone out to her. "For you," he said and they all listened as she spoke.

"Hullo?" she said.

Sam Hope was at the other end. He said quickly, "Are you all right? Someone's left the house on a stretcher."

"My father," Fleur told him. "A burglar shot him." She could feel Peter Strauss's eyes on her.

"Came in through the garden?" he asked.

"That's right," said Fleur.

"A burglar," he repeated. "Plainly you can't talk. Was it Tallinn?" She didn't answer. "You're not answering," he told her.

"It was an intruder," she said.

"OK – I get it. Fleur – look after yourself. I'll be in touch. Ring me if you can."

"All right," she said.

"All right, Uncle Sam," he instructed.

"Bye, Uncle Sam. Don't worry," she told him.

"Who was that?" asked Peter Strauss.

"Just my uncle – Mum's brother. He seems to know about the accident." Peter Strauss looked at her very hard.

"It's been on the news already, I expect," said Emily Strauss. "Hugh – be a sweetheart and go and ask the police when we can leave. I'm dropping. I feel dreadful. And I really want to look in at the hospital and talk to Sophia. She's entirely alone. It's frightful."

Hugh went off to talk to the police while Fleur wondered how it was, if Sam had got the story from the news, he knew someone had come out of the house on a stretcher, but, apparently, not who it was. He must be outside the house, she thought. The idea didn't comfort her. She didn't trust him. She didn't trust anybody, now.

Hugh returned with the information that the police were ready to let everyone go home shortly and was despatched on another errand.

"Henry Jones will be here very soon," Peter Strauss told him. "Could you possibly hang about outside discreetly until he turns up and then whisk

him into the house with as little fuss as possible? In view of Dickie's condition there are things he and I need to go into urgently. But I don't want it to be obvious."

"Confidence is everything in these situations," Francisco Haussman said, but there was an edge to his voice. He continued, "Since we're here without the police, would you like to tell me, perhaps, who the intruder was? Dickie evidently knew him. You, perhaps not. Am I right?"

Emily Strauss, a seasoned campaigner, stepped in. "I think we should save all this for the morning, with Dickie in hospital," she said.

Mercifully for Peter Strauss the inspector came into the room and told the party they were free to go, though they must expect to be called on next day. Diana and Valentine Keith left immediately after Peter Strauss's call to the hospital, when he was told Fleur's father was in surgery and nothing else could be said until the operation was over.

Henry Jones, pale with shock, was ushered in by Hugh. Emily Strauss left by cab, having asked Fleur to let her know if she needed any help and giving her the phone number of the London flat where she and her husband would be staying. Then Peter Strauss and Henry Jones hurried into the study together.

Fleur decided she was now in charge. She sent for the housekeeper and asked for a room to be prepared for George and Zoe Andriades in case they returned with Sophia from the hospital later on. She sent the rest of the staff to bed. Then she sat down with Hugh and they both had a brandy. He said, "Do you want me to stay? If Peter and Henry leave later, you'll be alone in the house."

"The servants are here," she said, adding brightly, "Did Chris turn up?"

"Yes," said Hugh.

"I thought you looked rather cheerful – earlier," she said.

"Fleur," he told her gravely, "I think you need someone with you."

"It's all right," she said. "I'll be all right."

"It's an awful business," he said. "Have you got any idea what it was all about – that madman coming in, shooting Dickie?"

"Yes," she told him. "That's the trouble. I have."

The phone rang. It was a friend of Dickie and Sophia who had heard the news in Tokyo. There was a second call, from Germany. Then a third. It was Dominic.

“Fleur,” he said urgently, “do you want to get out? I think you should. Sam Hope’s here. He had a man outside the house all evening, videoing the people coming and going and sending the pictures down to him by computer. Now he’s come back to London fast. Listen – a man just came into the house, didn’t he? We’ve just seen him on Sam’s guy’s video. Sam says he’s the man who tried to get him to kill us. Called himself Robinson.”

“What?” exclaimed Fleur. “Just came in?”

“About half an hour ago. We’ve just watched it. He’s a tall, nondescript bloke, fairly bald. Looked downcast. A young thin bloke in a tuxedo and dicky-bow met him on the steps and wafted him in.”

“That’s Henry Jones, my father’s right-hand man,” Fleur said. “I can’t believe it.” She was staring round the room, at the flowers, the furniture, at Hugh, lying in his chair with a glass of brandy, studying her curiously.

“Well it’s true. He offered Sam a quarter of a million to kill us. Flattering, isn’t it? Is he still in the house?”

“In the study.”

“Where are the older bloke and the young man?”

“One’s in the study with Henry Jones. Hugh’s here with me.”

“Where’s Tallinn? Did they catch him?”

“Not as far as I know.”

He groaned. “Well, there you have it. Tallinn’s on the loose. He may be on the roof for all we know. I wouldn’t put it past him. And in the study is Henry Jones who hires assassins. Don’t try to tell me you’re safe because you’re not. Don’t give me an argument, Fleur. You have to get out. Will you please do that?”

“Where are you?”

“We’ll be outside Victoria Station in the van in half an hour. But don’t wait – leave now. Make out you’re going to the garage for cigarettes or off for a kebab or whatever they do in those places.”

“Right,” Fleur said, her heart thudding. She put the phone down.

Hugh’s voice cut into the panic. “Need any help?”

“I have to get out of here,” she said.

He looked at her shrewdly. “Perhaps that’s best. That Russian may still be at large. Look – let’s go together. If anyone asks, we’re going out for a quick nightcap, just getting out of the house to relax after what happened, otherwise we’d never sleep.”

“Can we go straight away? I’m terrified of staying here.”

“I’ll get my coat,” he said. “Go upstairs and grab what you have to.”

Fleur ran upstairs, got her thick coat and filled her handbag with small essentials. Her hands shook as she did so. She ran down the stairs reciting to herself, “Out for a nightcap – relax after what happened this evening.” But there was no one in the hall. The phone was ringing as they quietly let themselves out, passed the policeman on the steps and went into the snowy street. It was freezing and there was little traffic.

“Where to?” asked Hugh.

“Victoria. I’m being picked up there.”

“There may not be too many cabs on a night like this – I’ll walk you down,” he said. As they went along he asked, “Are you sure the people who’re collecting you are reliable? I don’t know what it’s all about but it looks dicey. So you need to be very sure of your friends. If you’re at all uncertain, don’t meet them. Come back to the flat with me and we’ll work something out.”

She thought about it, but, still half expecting pursuit, decided Hugh was too close to the Jethros. “No – I trust them,” she said.

“Is one of them Ben Campbell?” he asked.

“No – Ben would sell me for what he could get,” she said.

“You found out.”

“I’ve found out a lot,” she replied. “I still think that man is going to come out of the dark. I really don’t know what’s going to happen next.”

“That Russian was the plutonium smuggler, wasn’t he?” said Hugh.

“Yes,” she said. “Everybody knows everything, these days, don’t they?”

“No. Everybody knows something. Nobody knows everything. I recognised him from his picture in *Die Welt*. Very dangerous guy. Attractive, though,” Hugh mused. It started to snow again. “Not my type, really. You wouldn’t ask him, ‘Is that a gun in your pocket or are you pleased to see me?’”

“It is, I’m not and I’m going to kill you,” Fleur said in a Russian accent. They started laughing. “Oh God,” said Fleur, “I’m on the run, it’s snowing and my father’s in a hospital, probably dying. What’s so funny about that?”

They had reached Victoria Station, where a few people loitered. There were some buses and a short rank of taxis, but the place seemed to Fleur frighteningly cold and deserted.

“I’ll wait with you,” he said, and they stood by the bus stops, far away from the stationary police van.

“This is very nice of you, Hugh,” Fleur told him.

“Dickie was rattled on that trip to St Lucia,” he told her. “As soon as we arrived he and Jones got a flight back. Men like that are always having crises, of course – but I smelt trouble even then. What’s it all about?”

“Keep quiet about it, but I think he’s been laundering money for August Tallinn, the Russian.”

“Ah,” said Hugh. “That makes sense,” he added. “He’s not the only one doing that sort of thing. We – the art dealers – are the people who get the money when it makes its next move. By the time we’re getting paid, by cheque or banker’s draft, the money’s usually half clean. But before that it’s been taken out of suitcases and bounced into the system. If your father dies it’ll be bad luck. He won’t have done anything the other big banks in the City don’t do.”

There was a tooting noise and across the street was the van, with Dominic leaning out of the window. Fleur gave Hugh a kiss and ran to it.

She and Dominic sat on sacks in the back. Joe was driving with Sam Hope beside him. Fleur told them what had taken place that night in Eaton Square.

“Don’t worry,” said Sam. “We’ll go down to Dover and you can take the ferry to France. No one’s going to be looking for you yet. With luck, all this will be resolved in a week or two. But if you stick around now someone may get hysterical and decide to stop you from talking. Or you’ll get arrested on the grounds that they need someone to blame. Stay clear for a bit, let the tale come leaking out, embarrassing everybody, let them work out the heroes and villains, then you can come back. You haven’t done anything wrong, after all.”

There was a silence until Fleur, who realised she had got a lot older in the past few months, said, “Does that make any difference?”

Twenty-Nine

So there we are, ladies and gentlemen of the Enquiry, and William.

I hoped, as I told the others, that after a flurry it would all settle down. And it seemed to. And I thought it was over. But as I've said before, this was the story that would not die. Now, eight months later, here I am on the move again, and this time it may be for keeps.

Here we were with a Bank of England Enquiry, the neatest, discreetest solution to the problem that wouldn't go away. Foreign investors are disquieted about the stability of our banking and political institutions; there are money markets all over the world who wouldn't mind the City of London disgraced and found unreliable, and all that lucrative business coming their own way. But we need it ourselves, don't we? It represents such a large proportion of national earnings.

You'll note that by February the small people – Fleur, Dominic, Joe, and I won't exclude myself from the group – had been forced to flee because of the big guys: bankers, senior civil servants and their masters, and a big-time, wealthy drug dealer and his former allies in the Kremlin.

Getting mixed up in all this meant Dominic and Joe had to disappear without telling their boss, knowing he would probably sack them and that this might precipitate them back on to the streets, or into petty crime with all its repercussions. Joe had been forced to part with Melanie, too. Fleur had failed to get to the end of her computer course and missed the first crucial discussion at the film company and the meeting at the firm which was supposed to help her sort out her creditors. And I wasn't happy myself about having to disappear at short notice because of the actions and fuck-ups of others. I was still hesitating about starting the countdown towards vaporising Hope Vansittart, but I knew if the auguries were bad over the period following Jethro's shooting, I'd have to. It was a classic example of that game of barons and peasants which is British life. Barons fight. Peasants starve.

It wasn't all bad. I went to where I went to, met up with old friends who will remain anonymous and caught some sun. I kept an eye on CNN and an ear on the World Service, spoke to people in Britain and chatted to the

young folk who were making the best of it in the South of France, where an unusually early spring was beginning. They were quite happy, especially Dominic and Fleur who gave up pretending they only fell on each other's bones from time to time because they were too hard up to rent a video. Melanie's mum even let her come away on a weekend break to France to see Joe – the down side being, the rest of the family came too. And back home Veronica took the problem at HVPS as a cue to stay home and redecorate her house. So our panic-stricken flight had its good side. Maybe, all in all we had had a better time than those at home who'd created the necessity for it.

As you'll know, William, ten days after the shooting one of the party ratted, and gave the police an account of what really occurred on that night in Eaton Square. I don't know who it was or why. It can't have been the servants because all the housekeeper saw was Tallinn coming through the window and demanding that the alarm be turned off. After that she and the others hid in the kitchen. Could it have been the Keiths, ready to back Jethro as long as he was of advantage to them, then keen to dissociate themselves from a possible scandal and disgrace? Was it Haussman, taking some kind of revenge, or trying to overturn Strauss and pick up his business? Or Maria Haussman, mindlessly going to the cop shop with an English-speaking friend and demanding justice, just to get her necklace back? It might even have been Sophia, dreadfully upset about her husband and ready to disobey Peter Strauss's orders in order to see Tallinn brought to justice.

Whoever blabbed, for whatever reason, the police couldn't just ignore the information. And a lot of sweat must have appeared on brows in high places and there must have been more of those tedious letters from the Germans implying a lack of brains and energy when it came to the hunt for the Russian. Because the informant had, knowingly or not, told them that the troublesome August Tallinn was still in the country, so what, for want of other evidence had been defined as a disturbed robbery and shooting, with a strong chance the perpetrator would never be caught, suddenly had to turn into a man-hunt for Tallinn.

Earlier, Peter Strauss, helped by Henry Jones, had done a good job of burying as many bodies as possible in the time available. Jethro had survived the operation but it was genuinely hard for the doctors to say at that time exactly how bad he was, harder still to predict whether he'd

improve or deteriorate in future. I hear he's in Athens, wheelchair-bound, his mind a blur, being tended devotedly by his wife who is, in turn, being loyally supported by her own family. Unfit to appear before your committee, it hardly needs saying.

The night of the shooting must have been a bad one for Peter Strauss. His was the counting-house area of the bank. He was the senior man. He knew what came in and went out and had a duty to know the rest, though the investments were Dickie's responsibility. But on that night, he must have realised he didn't know what was going on. And on that night, having been through a scene where he had known he himself might have been killed, and not knowing whether Jethro would live or die, he had to confront the only man who could tell him what Jethro had done and take him through the labyrinths Jethro had created – Henry Jones.

Jones must have suspected, as time went on, that a moment such as this would come, and now it had. The mystery is why, when he heard Jethro was in hospital undergoing an operation which might prove fatal, he didn't do a bunk. He must have thought that, with Strauss, he could get through it, save the bank and save his own reputation and that of the boss he adored. Strauss must certainly have told him that, though Strauss was probably more concerned for himself and the bank than he was for Jones.

The figure of ten per cent of all money going through the banking system being money earned through drugs may be a conservative one. The US system demands of banks that they declare deposits of over ten thousand dollars but that doesn't work. The British have an honour system, which doesn't work either.

The Drugs Traffic Offences Act of 1986 only asks a British bank to turn in a suspiciously wealthy customer if they "knew or had strong reason to suspect" the funds came from illicit sources. It's not hard to mount a legal defence against a law so loosely worded. A normal person might think neither Strauss nor Jethro could reasonably claim they had no suspicions about Tallinn, when he kept on turning up with enormous quantities of cash. But the law's a funny thing, William, and an expensive legal team might be able to get away with just that defence.

The biggest problem of a person with a lot of illicit cash is over at once if they can find a banker willing to take it. It goes through the system and comes out clean. As it is no doubt becoming clear from my story, Jethro did it for Tallinn.

Jones, during the period where Jethro was accepting ten to twenty million dollars a year from Tallinn, must have had to work like a dog to get rid of it – buying property and businesses in the UK, creating offshore accounts, hiding the money in Greek Cyprus. All the time he knew every move he made was illegal.

However, instead of heading for the airport, he loyally turned up at Eaton Square that night to help Strauss. Strauss must have told him of his sensible strategy. First, they would bury the worst and the easiest of the funds and secondly they would make a full disclosure of what they couldn't hide to the Bank of England. Jones must have seen that, dead or alive, Jethro was going to get the blame and one of his motives for offering his help may have been to minimise the consequences to his boss. Another, to reduce the amount of evidence against himself.

I'm no expert in all this, but what I heard was told me by a broker friend I met for a meal in the summer, when I thought all this was over. He said he thought that Jethro's association with Tallinn must have begun in the early nineties, as the recession took hold and full economic collapse began. Strauss Jethro Smith found itself in dire straits. Bank of England regulations state that only ten per cent of a bank's capital should be out on loan. Once the loans exceed twenty-five per cent the bank is obliged to inform the Bank of England of its position. The Bank, after investigation, can close it down.

My friend, whom we'll call Fred, said that at the time we were talking about Jethro was well over his ten per cent deposit protection fund, was probably over the twenty-five per cent absolute limit too. And had not informed the Bank of England, a fact masked in the Bank's records by a team of accountants, supervised by Henry Jones.

"In that position, all you need," said Fred, "is an unanticipated serious recession where even your sound money goes rotten. It's like going down a slide, whoosh, right down to the bottom. Next stop – bank closure – personal disgrace – possible trial and conviction."

Jethro knew he couldn't go on forever, playing games with the numbers. "In addition," said Fred, "he must have been getting wind of a possible Bank of England Enquiry. I certainly was. There were whispers. All he needed was more rumours, the Bank of England poking its nose in and a sudden withdrawal of capital by investors. I'm guessing he would have needed a minimum of twenty million to clear this whole thing up. Or a

smaller sum, with a guarantee that further smaller sums would be forthcoming regularly, making it safe for Jones to fiddle the books for another year.

“Now I don’t know,” said my friend, “who made the fatal introduction. Suffice it to say that Jethro and Tallinn met. And once Jethro decided to co-operate there would be only two further problems: getting the money into the bank and hiding it cleverly once it was there. It had to be moved, invested quickly. Jones would have been the man for that.”

I was curious. I hesitated, then asked him, “How come you know so much about this?”

He gave me a funny look. “Everybody does, dear boy. Everybody does,” he told me.

After the long night in Jethro’s study on the night of the shooting, Strauss, having got all the facts out of Jones, must have decided on damage limitation. Looked at one way, Jethro’s injury, nearly death, could be looked at as the best thing that could have happened for the bank. No more nasty money would come in now. They could clean up quietly and blame everything that wouldn’t wash out on him, if they had to.

It was not long before poor old Dickie Jethro had been officially declared, at least pro tem, a human vegetable. Scapegoat duly in place, Strauss called in the Bank of England.

That was when I rang the happy trio in the South of France and said I thought Strauss had the situation sufficiently under control for them to return safely, though they should lodge a full account of what they knew with a solicitor, all dated and properly witnessed, just in case of any trouble. I didn’t think, now it was all sorted and his boss was as good as dead, that loyal dog Jones would start any more murder plots to protect him. Nor was Tallinn likely to surface, if he had any sense, to make any trouble. He was now wanted in Germany for smuggling dangerous materials and in the UK for murder.

They were pleased at the thought of getting back, especially Joe, because of Melanie. So back we all came, fit, well and ready to take up once more the threads of our quiet lives.

What a bugger, William, though, when it all started up again. You could call it an unfortunate coincidence, sheer bad luck and so forth. In the circles in which you move you probably are. It’s a good explanation, if no

one wants to take responsibility. In fact it was a case of dangling threads, something not attended to, something everybody hoped, if they didn't look, would go away. That and the fact that this is a small world, and getting smaller. Everybody knows somebody who knows somebody else. You're only six handshakes away from the President of the United States, they say. Not just you, William, anybody; that's the theory. It's official. It's called the Six Degrees of Separation.

So – Adrian Drake was the husband of Fleur's friend Jess. He was a journalist. In June he was in Peru on a story when he bumped into Tallinn, drunk, in a bar in Lima. He knew what he looked like. After all, he was the man who'd supplied the pictures of Tallinn for Fleur and the others. He'd later heard, very confidentially, from his wife, about what happened on the evening Fleur's father was shot. He had no problem in recognising our boy.

He stepped up and said hullo, carefully. That's how you would say hullo to a man like Tallinn, whether he was drunk or sober. Drake spoke Russian – he'd studied modern languages at Oxford – so that helped.

Tallinn, probably feeling a bit depressed and isolated, started talking. A sad tale, which he told Drake during three long alcoholic evenings in workmen's bars in Lima. Drake soon realised he had a scoop in Tallinn and Tallinn told him, vengefully, to go ahead and write his story. Drake returned to London with the material for four long features, which were later syndicated in other European countries and in the USA.

The papers' lawyers were careful, of course. Strauss Jethro Smith was never named, or Jethro himself. But those who knew that world found it easy to work out who Tallinn's banker was. MPs weighed in, so did the German Government, still smarting about the refusal to hand Tallinn over into their jurisdiction in a timely manner. There was talk about a possible collapse of Strauss Jethro Smith if they were obliged to surrender the millions of pounds they held in Tallinn's name – as they would have to if the money was proved to have come from a criminal source. However, Strauss had anticipated this, and had covered it. A Bank of England Enquiry had earlier proved the firm to be on a solid basis, largely as a result of Jethro's efforts.

Tallinn, on the other hand, had engineered Iran's nuclear capacity, and half of Europe and the Middle East wanted vengeance. There were questions and protests from many different quarters. Thinking quickly, the British Government announced a Bank of England Enquiry, to be held

privately, not open to press or public, but which would produce a report of its findings after a thorough investigation. They smacked together a committee consisting of everyone and his dog and put you in charge, William. There's still a lot of noise, of course, but Parliament still isn't back from their long summer hols, so there can be no public answers until it is. And when the serious bullets start flying in the autumn, William, I think your position will be uncomfortable. It's still being discussed in the papers, and it's lighting up the Internet. I'm not sure the Government will be able to lay the matter to rest between the pages of your report. You'll be implicated in the disaster. You know my feelings about this business – it never goes away.

There were four articles in all. They came out in the Sunday broadsheet Drake worked for in July and August. All dynamite, but lucky timing, for some, with Parliament in recess and the directorate of the Bank of England, also largely absent, agreeing by phone and fax from Long Island, Tuscany and Thailand to set up their reassuring Enquiry.

I was a happy enough man before Drake's accidental encounter with Tallinn. When I came back from my break after the shooting of Jethro I got back to work. And while I was away I'd met Colette – light of my life. I don't deserve her. I'd seen Dominic, Joe and Fleur a couple of times. I felt like their jolly old uncle. Fleur had managed to hang on to her job and Dominic and Joe, though fired from the City job after the unexplained absence, got new jobs with a contractor working for a housing association. Fleur had even come to an accommodation with her old creditors, making arrangements to pay some of the debts off gradually. She told me that since the shooting she'd seen nothing of the Jethros.

In June she called me and told me that Adrian Drake was writing a series of articles about Tallinn. The first dealt with his early life and entry into the mafiosi, with the help of his friend, the local mayor. The next dealt with the build-up of his trade, the drugs, the routes and his arrangements with the members of the Russian Duma, the military and the Secret Police. In the final two features Drake described Tallinn's dealings with a British banker and his realisation that his support network inside Russia had collapsed and his erstwhile helpers were selling him out; how he'd run to London and sought the protection of his business partner, the banker, who'd organised official help for him. He had been guarded by men who had been

instructed, he claimed, to disappear when a group of hired hitmen came to kill him.

And he had described to Drake the scene at Eaton Square when he'd shot Jethro. It didn't matter to him. He was wanted for everything but incest all over Europe and the Middle East already. One more crime was no skin off his nose.

This part of the story, the shooting, had to be carefully handled by Drake and his paper, but the articles caused a furore. What Drake didn't reveal, the Internet did. Shock waves reverberated all over London and some, no doubt, reached other capitals, where other bankers were taking on dodgy mafia money while blind eyes were turned.

Drake told us all about it one evening, after he got back from Lima. It was extraordinary, he said, sitting with Tallinn night after night, in smoky bars full of music and loud conversation, listening to his story. An articulate man, he said, and intelligent. You could see why he'd been successful. But Drake said there was something about him he'd come across in other, similar men. He was completely cold, emotionally distanced like all men who take others' deaths for granted. Drake said he was frightened all the time, afraid that at some point in the conversation Tallinn would just lose it, and kill him on the spot. He said he knew that since Tallinn would never signal what he was going to do, he'd stand no chance. Or, he thought, Tallinn might wake up sober one morning, decide he regretted making his revelations and come round and kill Drake to get the recordings back.

On the last occasion they met, Drake said, he was so frightened of this he drank along with Tallinn, too scared to go home in case he woke up with Tallinn bending over him. He just collapsed across the table in the bar. Tallinn did the same. They woke up together next morning still where they'd been sitting the night before. An old woman was mopping the floor round their feet. Tallinn had burst out laughing, Drake told us. He said he had a certain charm, if you didn't mind being charmed while the hair on the back of your neck was standing on end. Apparently they parted on quite good terms, had a final drink at the airport and exchanged hats just as Drake went through the check-in to get the plane back to London.

Later he was put under pressure to reveal Tallinn's exact whereabouts, but he wouldn't, and pointed out that in any case it was likely Tallinn would have moved on by then. It looked, from what Fleur had said, as if the day before Tallinn broke into Jethro's house and shot him, Jethro had raised

three million for him, which he'd probably taken out of the country in bearer bonds. He had enough cash to go where he wanted.

I heard all this in Adrian and Jess's house in Highgate, in a long room with the windows open on to the garden. It was ten, but the light had not yet completely failed. Candles burned and there was a smell of roses from outside. Drake was lolling across a sofa as he spoke. His wife sat in a chair and Fleur, the only other person in the room, was on a cushion on the floor, hunched up with her arms around her knees.

"For five years," Drake said, "Tallinn's cash was flooding into Strauss Jethro Smith. It came into private airfields by private planes, and in small boats from Holland and France landing all round the coasts of Britain and Ireland. It came in container trucks originating from Zurich, Milan and Lyons. It even came in travellers' suitcases." On one famous occasion two million dollars had been handed to a trawler captain from the deck of a surfaced Russian submarine off the coast of Norway.

One suitcase came out of Afghanistan on a donkey laden with rugs and saddle-cushions and then reached Britain peacefully in the bottom of a big brass pot which ended up in an antique shop in London. The owner of the shop was in debt and it was a one-off. He handed over the money; Tallinn paid him and never asked again.

Another couple of consignments were made part of a deal for smuggling in illicit immigrants from Bangladesh. Tallinn was clever. He seldom used the same methods twice or the same people, which meant no one got used to his routes and no one got cheeky with him. "Who would have dared anyway?" Drake said, his face showing his own fear of the Russian.

"He had a staff of course, a group of henchmen you wouldn't want to meet on a bright sunny day, let alone a dark night. But the mules or the routes were varied. It was a game with him. Tallinn is quick, intelligent, not thoughtful, easily bored. His idea of a relationship with a man is that the man shouldn't betray him before he, Tallinn, betrays the man first; with a woman it's rape. He doesn't have any morals, not even the 'family', the banal ethic of other criminals. The morality of his youth was communism, which nobody believed in, and that was followed by jungle law. We'll never understand what made him tick, I suppose, unless he writes his memoirs one day, which seems unlikely – but with the likes of Tallinn, you never know. I think he's one of those people who are too much for themselves. They come out of nowhere with a mix of ambition, inventiveness, energy and

restlessness and develop into something nobody would have expected. They need the right climate to grow, of course, and present-day Russia is the place for Tallinn to thrive. I don't know if you could call him a psychopath. He'd have eaten a baby – fuck it, he'd have eaten his baby – but arguably, he was a creature adapted for survival in the climate he found himself in.”

Drake said that the period where Tallinn's money kept on rolling in unstoppably to Strauss Jethro Smith was about the time of the attack on Vanessa Whitcombe in Gordon Mews. Jethro kept the flat for confidential business, very basic confidential business involving backpacks full of used dollar bills in high denominations and suitcases tied up with string containing ditto. Not very nice from Jethro's point of view. Too crude. We like to eat meat but we don't necessarily want to go to the abattoir to see it killed. But he had to talk to Tallinn somewhere. He didn't want him in the bank and he certainly didn't want him popping round to Eaton Square and being invited in for a cup of tea by Sophia while he was waiting. He knew Tallinn was an animal.

It must have been horrible for Jethro, having to get along with Tallinn and listen to his abominable accounts of what he was doing to get the cash into his lily-white hands. But he was trapped. He had no choice. All Tallinn needed to do was to inform the police of what had been happening and give them pointers where to look and he, Sir Richard Jethro, the acceptable face of capitalism for the Government, would find himself doing seven to ten years in Ford Open Prison, coming out a tired, disgraced, elderly man. With no money. Jethro wanted and needed money and all that came with it.

So, after I'd assured Pugh that I couldn't find the two men and the woman Jethro thought could bring him down, Jethro must have stopped thinking about it.

By this time Tallinn's funds at Strauss Jethro Smith must have amounted to over fifty million, consisting of the sums paid in and the profits made from them by Jones. No wonder Tallinn was cut up when he thought he wasn't going to get it back from the bank – even though, in that, he was probably mistaken. He wanted them to liquidate everything in a few days because he was on the run. He probably wanted electronic transfers to Latin America and offshore islands in his own name and that simply couldn't be done in the time available. When Jethro tried to tell him this, he took it that Jethro was out to steal his money. In the world he came from

that would have been natural. Equally natural was his revenge. The shooting was by way of a misunderstanding over business ethics.

But there would have been a crisis sooner or later, while Tallinn was flooding money into the bank and Jethro couldn't stop him. Something had to happen and what happened was that Tallinn got into trouble. It began with his associates selling him out, which enabled the Germans to catch the man they believed responsible for Iran's sudden elevation to the position of Bad Boy of the Middle East – the man who had set embassy lights burning all night all over the Middle East, Europe, not forgetting the Pentagon. Well, we always need some second-rate Satan these days, don't we, since the collapse of communism, or, frankly, where's the charm? So Tallinn was on the run. And he shot Fleur's father. There's always collateral damage when someone gets killed. Friends, relatives, daughters ...

As I've said, it was a lovely summer evening in Adrian and Jess's lovely house, but, as Drake unravelled it all for us, Jethro's daughter shivered. "I still think of Tallinn," she said, "coming through the windows in a shower of glass. See the whole table, all the people there, frozen. We couldn't do anything. I see him shoot my father."

Her friend got up and put a match to the fire. Logs burst into flame. A perfect summer evening, windows open, the fire dispelling a slight chill, the scent of roses.

Drake said, "It was pretty weird, sitting in those dark bars with salsa and rumba coming out of the jukeboxes, looking into those very pale blue eyes and hearing Tallinn's story."

"What's the real reason he spoke to you?" I asked him.

"He was lonely, he told me. He spoke only Russian and a bit of basic English. And Peru's not full of Russian speakers. But myself I think he's probably got a plan. Getting his story told is only part of it."

"What plan?" I said.

Drake shook his head. "I don't know, but I don't think he's finished yet."

He said Tallinn had been born in Belarus, not far from the Polish border, in 1970. His place of birth put him firmly on the European side of the Russian federation. He'd had no father to speak of, unless, and this was something he didn't make quite clear, his father had been the mayor of the region, which must have helped when they went into business together. By the time of glasnost the boy was already out of hand, head of a robber band,

never going to school, stealing cars and breaking his mother's heart. It wasn't too long before he became a useful part of a drugs chain which ran from Afghanistan into Latvia and Lithuania. He did his apprenticeship as a drugs courier into the Baltic ports. Then the day came, when Tallinn was fifteen, when the boss of his end of the operation had an unfortunate accident and was found dead in the harbour at Riga one December morning. Perhaps he'd stumbled in, drunk – a man wouldn't last three minutes in that water. Or possibly someone had knocked him on the head and pushed him in. Anyway, Tallinn, it turned out, had his notebook and took over the business. He was on his way.

There was a mutually beneficial arrangement with his local mayor, who, a year after the association began, was the owner of a villa on the Côte d'Azur. The mayor, easing the path of Tallinn's consignments, also had a seat in the Russian Parliament, the Duma, and through his connections there Tallinn's contacts grew and widened, his protection became better and better and his empire expanded. And somewhere along the line, when profits were fine apart from the fact of not knowing what to do with them, he met the man who introduced him to Jethro.

Then came his downfall, a rival who offered better terms to his contacts in the Duma, the KGB and the army and who backed his claims by a savage massacre. It was over a consignment of heroin leaving Uzbekistan in army trucks and left six of Tallinn's soldiers dead on the dusty plain. Tallinn himself barely escaped with his life, fleeing through Afghanistan, relying on the old loyalties of the tribesmen who'd been supplying and couriating heroin for him over the years – loyalties, he knew, which would soon switch to whoever was opposing him. But he got into Pakistan and that was where he heard he now had two couriers in the hands of the Germans and the Turks. He knew he must have been betrayed by the couriers, who were no longer afraid of his long reach.

He knew he was in deep trouble. He had one way out – to go to Britain, appeal to Jethro for protection, and get his money.

And, William, here's why you'll find you really don't want me at the Enquiry, confirming Tallinn's allegations. Because Jethro must have confided to Prothero at MI5, or quite likely someone even higher up than Prothero, that the man the Germans wanted for smuggling nuclear material and personnel to Iran had been laundering his dirty money through Strauss Jethro Smith for six, maybe seven long years. And Jethro must have told

whoever it was that Tallinn had threatened that if he was extradited to Germany, he'd tell all.

While continuing to conceal the facts from his co-director at the bank, Jethro, cornered, must have revealed all to the British authorities and asked them to cover for him. And they did, William. Obviously, they did. The alternative would have been the shame of seeing their blue-eyed boy disgraced, a scandal involving the government, the collapse of a City bank, and loss of faith in our banking system.

It was a nasty choice for whoever made the ultimate decision. And that decision, William, I need hardly tell you, must have been made from high up, very high up – how high I leave you to wonder.

Typically, they temporised at first, just resisting the German efforts to extradite Tallinn, protecting him, treating him like an honoured guest. It got very embarrassing, with the Germans repeating their perfectly legitimate request for Tallinn and the British Government coming up with silly excuses not to return him. It was all attracting attention, so some bright spark, perhaps from the MI6 core, the illuminati, the ungovernable ones, decided that the most obvious solution to this problem was to knock Tallinn off. This failed, letting him loose on the general public – and the rest is history.

When Drake had finished his story we put on a record and listened to it quietly. Music on a summer night – one of life's greatest pleasures, isn't it, William? But it was a melancholy pleasure. *Lacrimae rerum*, William.

Well, I'm closing down now, old boy. I'm off on the morning tide. Goodbye – or is it just *au revoir*?

Yours aye, Sam Hope.

Thirty

She had come from a valley of cypress and olive trees, where cyclamen in pink, lilac and cream sprinkled the grass and beyond it lay a bay of clear Mediterranean blue.

Now Fleur sat beside her father in the courtyard of an old house outside Athens. Trees and flowers stood in pots on the mosaic floor. Water came slowly from a fountain. Dickie Jethro was in a wheelchair, one side of his body paralysed.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She didn’t know how much he remembered of what he had done, what had happened, how much he understood about what was still going on.

“Tried – tried – to get you away from those men,” he said effortfully, from a mouth one side of which was still and useless.

She smiled at him. “You offered me Ben, and money, and all I did was run away.” Sophia had told her that the Barbados bribes – the money, the retrieved lover – were chiefly to separate her from Adelaide House and Dominic and Joe, whose knowledge threatened her father. She had not asked whether her father had been the man who had decided to have them killed, or whether it was an idea dreamed up by the ever loyal Henry Jones. For that matter, she had not told Sophia or her father she was on holiday in Greece with Dominic. She had come over that day from the island in a boat and would return that evening to the table under the cypress, supper in the open, the scent of herbs, candles burning in the darkness.

He sighed. “Naughty girl.” He pointed up into the clear sky where a flock of birds flew. “Swallows, going south,” he said. She could barely make out what he said, did not know if what he said was true. “Winter coming,” he said.

“It’s not so bad here,” she said. “Think of London, sleet and snow, short days.”

As she spoke she realised what she said was not consoling a man who had led an active, exciting life and was now caught, luxuriously, in a golden web spun for him by his wife and her parents. He had devoted nurses, his loving wife always in attendance and the best medical treatment obtainable.

All Dickie Jethro lacked was his freedom. He was a man of power suddenly powerless, a man of decision who no longer could decide anything for himself. He was not happy, sometimes impatient. Sophia, Fleur thought, was already showing the strain six months of this unnatural life had imposed on her. She was thirty-one, Dickie fifty-eight and wheelchair bound. What the outcome would be no one could predict. Whatever her father had done, Fleur thought, he was being well punished for it.

“Fleur,” he said, “Fleur.”

It was almost time for her to leave to get the boat back to the island. Sophia emerged from the house, smiling. “So glad you came,” she said. “Dickie often talks of you, don’t you darling?”

“Bobby doesn’t come, or Hazel,” he brought out.

“They’re very busy,” Sophia told her husband. “Hazel’s just had another baby. You know that. She sent you the photographs.”

“No—” he stumbled out, “no m— no money – for them.”

“Hazel certainly doesn’t care,” Sophia told him. “She told me so. She said money isn’t everything.”

“It’s a h— h— hell of a a lot,” he managed, his eyes gleaming.

“You’re still a very bad man,” she said. She had told Fleur she was keeping from her husband the news of the Bank of England Enquiry into Strauss Jethro Smith, but knew he had a radio and often listened to the World Service at night, when unable to sleep. He had not mentioned it, but she believed he had heard the news. She said the thought of having his old life combed over and taken apart in committee without his own testimony must be agony to him. There would be a report, too, and further publicity.

There was a silence broken only by the splashing of the water in the marble fountain.

“I must go, Dickie,” Fleur said. “But I’ll come back.”

He smiled, painfully, one side of his mouth remaining quite still. “Come back,” he said.

“I do hope you will, Fleur. You’re always welcome,” Sophia said warmly.

Fleur left the house and ran down the quiet street, where great houses stood in gardens on either side.

Then she was in Piraeus, thirsty and breathless. Outside a café sat Dominic with a second man in a white suit and panama hat, with a very

pretty dark girl in white. Fleur kissed Dominic. The other man pulled out a chair for her. "How is he?" he asked.

She shook her head. "He's very unhappy."

"How are you?"

"Very happy."

"That's as it should be," Sam Hope said. He ordered her a drink.

Dominic told her, "Hurry up, Fleur, we haven't got long to catch the boat." He lifted his glass. "To us, health and happiness."

Fleur dispelled the image of the man in his wheelchair up on the hill. She raised her glass and thought of the olive, cypress and oleander, the candles, the sound of the sea to which she and Dominic would soon return.

A Note on the Author

HILARY BAILEY was born in 1936 and was educated at thirteen schools before attending Newnham College, Cambridge. Married with children, she entered the strange, uneasy world of '60s science fiction, writing some twenty tales of imagination which were published in Britain, the USA, France and Germany. She has edited the magazine *New Worlds* and has regularly reviewed modern fiction for the *Guardian*. Her first novel was published in 1975 and she has since written twelve novels and a short biography. She lives in Ladbroke Grove, London.



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